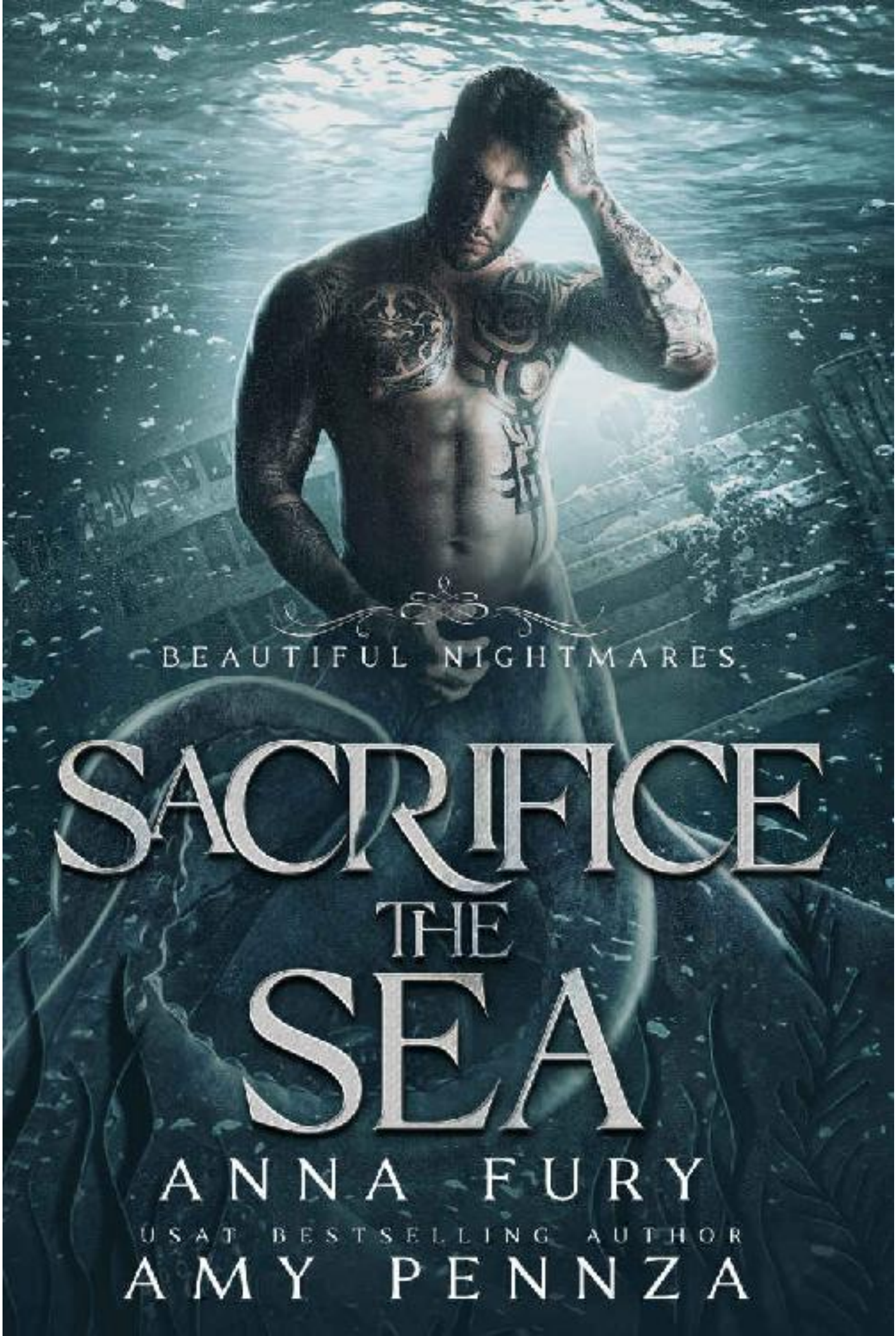
BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES
SACRIFICE THE SEA
ANNA FURY
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AMY PENNZA

Sacrifice the Sea

AN MMM LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

BOOK THREE

ANNA FURY

AMY PENNZA

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Content Notice

Sacrifice the Sea is intended for mature audiences due to adult themes that might be triggering for sensitive readers. These include on-page murder, wartime, mention of parental death, mention of child abuse, and murderous intent.

While the themes of this retelling feel dark, the deep love between our characters is a beautiful light at the end of the tunnel. This book ends with a happily ever after.

Take care of yourself, and email us with any questions.
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Prologue

TRITON

I should feel elated, but I'm numb instead. I pump my tailfin once, moving quickly down a long hallway of the desecrated underwater city my clan has finally reclaimed. The coral walls and ceiling are missing giant chunks. The windows are blown wide. Our war with the leviathans nearly cost us everything, but my clan emerged victorious.

Ahead, the doors to the Great Hall are thrown open, one panel ripped off its hinges. I slip inside and gaze at the carnage, remembering the space when it was full of life. Six months ago, I held court here. Hosted parties and presided over mating ceremonies. Now, the Hall is a ruined husk, the sounds of laughter and celebration a faded memory.

The war with the leviathans was not my choice. But I fought it, banishing the selfish, cruel creatures to the ocean's depths. Now, I'm saddled with the responsibility of not only leading my clan but serving as the Lord of the Sea Syndicate.

The latter isn't my choice, either. Until a week ago, another clan's king led the syndicate. I was happy to follow him. Then the leviathans rose from the trenches and slaughtered my predecessor's entire clan.

And then the remaining three lords of the syndicates called upon me to replace him. The sea has always been dangerous. No one else wanted to rule. But someone had to. *"The sea must remain peaceful at all costs,"* the lords reminded me.

As I look around my dying coral castle, I wonder if the costs are simply too high.

Voices echo through the murky water, drawing my gaze toward the throne room. With a flick of my tailfin, I move toward it. Silt swirls in lazy eddies as I pass. The seabed hasn't settled from the fight. We won mere hours ago, but the battle was vicious. I've lost half my clan. Maybe more.

I enter the throne room. Ari, my second, looks up from where he stands next to the big, coral-covered chair. He grips the edge with one hand, his knuckles white against his already pale skin. His jaw is clenched, his beautiful green tail stiff. He looks ready to crack.

Seated on my throne is my third, Crallek, the sea witch. Eight long, dark tentacles curl around the throne's legs, suctioning him firmly in place.

On my fucking throne.

Crallek's voice is slurred as he shouts across the room. "Finally returned to celebrate, have you, Triton? We won, my king! We did it!" He raises a pouch to his lips, and his burnished cheeks hollow as he gulps. He's always had a penchant for siren mead, even though we rarely interact with the all-female clans. They're dangerous like nearly everything else in the sea.

Ari's emerald eyes flash as he holds my gaze. He knows where I've been this evening. What I've been doing. I resist the urge to finger the shell locket around my neck. It's hidden under the many layers of necklaces I wear, each holding a different, important meaning.

I pin Crallek with a hard look and let my displeasure bleed into my tone. "Off the throne, Third. We have a lot of work ahead of us, and it does not include you sitting there." If there's one thing I won't tolerate now that we've won the war, it's anyone but me sitting in that chair. Cementing my place as Lord of the Sea Syndicate came at a high fucking cost. That throne is *mine*.

Crallek's dark eyes narrow. "A little touchy, are we?" His tentacles curl more tightly around the throne's legs.

I'm across the room in seconds. I reach out and grip his throat, my thumb claw pressed to his jugular. With a growl, I yank him off my seat, relishing the sound of his suckers ripping from the dead coral surface. A chunk of throne breaks away and falls to the seabed—a potent reminder of just how tenuous my rule is right now.

I thrust my face into Crallek's. "The syndicate lords asked *me* to take over the Sea Syndicate. They entrusted *me* to banish the leviathans to their depths. They have empowered *me* to act on behalf of this entire planet to keep the peace for monsters and humans alike. Get. Off. The Fucking. Throne."

Ari's by my side in a beat, a steadfast presence as I drag Crallek off the throne and shove him down the set of stairs that lead to my perch.

We were young males together, the three of us, friends for most of our formative years. But that's changed in the last decade or two. Crallek's powers—and desires—have grown in strength and darkness. Most days, I don't recognize him. But we couldn't have banished the leviathans to the

depths without his power of persuasion. And without banishing them, I couldn't have taken over as the Sea Syndicate's new ruler. Crallek was the key to our success despite the darkness that seeps from him.

But it's only a matter of time before he uses that darkness against Ari or me or what remains of my people. And what he'd have us do is terrifying. The things he wants no longer align with anything peaceful or good.

As Crallek sprawls on the ground, another chunk breaks off the throne. The oversize chair was once a burnished, peachy coral. Now it's dead. It'll start to fall apart soon. The whole castle will. Rebuilding will be my first act as Lord of the Sea Syndicate—that and not allowing the leviathans to rise from the depths ever again.

Ari goes to Crallek and pulls him up by the elbow. "Here's your mead, old friend. Let's finish celebrating, and then it's time for rest. We'll talk about rebuilding tomorrow."

"Rebuilding?" Crallek sneers, yanking his arm from Ari's grip. "We banished the leviathans. We can do anything. Let us take on the syndicates now. They won't see it coming. We could rule this entire plane. The humans can't stop us, either. They're useless, worthless pieces of shi—"

"No," I growl. "Not now, not ever. The Myth made a deal with the humans. We rebuilt their world, and now we rule it. But the syndicates *must* share power. This plane was chaos before that agreement was struck. I won't allow you to risk that peace."

Crallek snarls, sharp teeth visible behind black lips. His dark hair swirls in a current flowing through a giant hole in the side of the Great Hall. "Allow me? You won't *allow* me?" He straightens to his full height. Then he moves, his tentacles curling up the stairs. Green sheens his eyes as he begins to ascend the throne.

Ari meets my gaze.

My heart pounds. We knew it was coming to this—that our victory against the leviathans would launch Crallek on a power trip and maybe push him over the edge into a darkness he can't return from. We've had to discourage him from making poor choices with his power before. But lately, it's been more difficult to drag him back from the abyss.

And there it is—a faint scratching at the edges of my mind. Like a fish nibbling at the bones of long-dead prey, Crallek's persuasive gift slinks along the outer edges of my consciousness, searching relentlessly for a hole

to slip through. If he finds it, he'll seize control of my mind. Long ago, when we were young, he agreed he would never do this. He promised he would never turn his gift against Ari or me.

But that was before the syndicate lords asked me to assume my fallen predecessor's role. By agreeing to take over the Sea Syndicate, I put a target on my clan's back.

And the leviathans came for us.

With Crallek's help, I won. It nearly cost this clan everything, but the reward is peace.

Was it worth it? As I look at the sneer on Crallek's angular, handsome face, I'm not sure it was.

He keeps moving, his tentacles propelling him up the stairs.

The scratching in my mind becomes a sharp, stabbing sensation. I can't let Crallek know I feel it.

I need the element of surprise. So, I smile.

He frowns. Then he roars, baring his sharklike teeth. I brace for an attack, but a noise gives us both pause.

My advisor, Bastian, click-clacks into the Great Hall, scuttling side to side on enormous crab legs. His powerful front claws grip a sheet of waterproof paper. His gaze lands on us, and surprise flares in his eyes as he observes Crallek hovering over me.

Bastian's top half is humanoid—a gift from Crallek. His bottom half remains the giant crustacean figure he was born with. He crosses his muscular human arms and gives the sea witch a cold look. "Am I interrupting something?"

I focus on Crallek. My heart still thumps painfully, but a sort of calm descends over me. This is all going down exactly like I predicted.

Ari sees the opening we planned for—he and Bastian and me.

My second darts up the stairs, throws a muscular arm around Crallek's neck, and drags him down the stairs to my feet. Bastian scurries to us and grips both of Crallek's hands in one of his big claws. His other claw seizes as many of Crallek's tentacles as he can, holding him immobile.

Crallek bellows and hurls curses at us, but the damage is done. Any remaining trust we had in one another is shattered in an instant.

He'd have us ruin the tenuous peace we're trying to build. I can't allow it. I can't stand by while he tries to take over the world. And that's what he wants. His power has become a poison that would drown us all.

I pull the shell pendant from underneath my other necklaces, holding it tightly in one hand. My heart shreds in my chest at what we're about to do.

Several of Crallek's tentacles wind around my tail and waist. One snakes around my arm, but as the pendant in my hand begins to glow, it loosens. He pales, and his power stops scratching at my mind. He's too drunk to focus on questioning me and trying to control me at the same time.

"What's that?" he demands. "What is this? What are you doing?"

I close my eyes and speak the words the vampire Lucius du Sang taught me. They'll grant me temporary vampiric siphon abilities so I can take Crallek's power and lock it in the shell.

"No!" Crallek roars. "This power is not yours to take! You can't leave me like this. You can't steal it!"

Ari leans down to Crallek's ear, his lips close enough to brush the curve like a lover might.

Like he's done to me thousands of times.

"I'm sorry, old friend," he murmurs. And then he stabs a lavastone knife through Crallek's chest.

Crallek screams—a high-pitched, terrified noise that freezes whatever's left of my heart. Black blood swirls in the air, clouding my vision as the sea witch struggles. His tentacles unstick from my body and float away as I place the shell pendant at his throat and continue the incantation.

He gurgles up a billowy cloud of blood, choking on it.

My heart breaks completely, shattering in two at what I'm doing to a male I've called my friend my entire life. I'm already grieving his loss—and the loss of the male he could have been if he wasn't power-hungry.

Ari's brilliant eyes meet mine. I see my devastation mirrored there, along with anger that we had to do this. That it came to this.

Crallek screams as a glowing green stream of power begins to exit his lips and enter the shell pendant.

None of us say a word as he bellows. The sound fades as his power leaves him. Instead, it reverberates from the stream of green power. His eyes lock onto it as he chokes on another mouthful of blood. The next time his lips move, I hear nothing.

His stolen power spins in an eddy just above his bared teeth. I continue the incantation, and the power funnels into the shell pendant, the glow so bright it hurts to look at it.

Crallek chokes a final time. His tentacles clench around me, and then his head falls to the side. The shell goes dark.

A moment passes, then two. Ari pulls the knife from Crallek's chest and tosses it aside. "It's done," he rasps.

We didn't want to have to do this.

When Ari looks up at me, I know exactly what he'll say next. After so many years together, I know his mind as well as I know my own.

"What about the child?"

Bastian hisses in a breath, clutching Crallek's body so it doesn't float away on the strengthening current. "The child poses a threat, my king. All sea witches have power, and it is highly likely he would inherit Crallek's __"

"The child is off limits," I say. "I will not be a party to killing an innocent. This was enough."

Ari purses his lips, the topmost one puckered with a scar he earned long before I met him. His cheek still seeps blood from a wound the leviathans inflicted.

Bastian's voice is firm when he speaks again. "We'll have to revisit this when the child comes of age and finds his voice."

"Done," I agree. "We can't let anything risk the peace the other syndicates have entrusted us to keep. They believe our clan will succeed where others could not. I want us to focus on rebuilding. Send a squadron of sea nymphs to watch over the child. They'll know when it's time for us to become involved…if we have to."

Ari shakes his head once in disagreement but says nothing. He knows better than to argue with me. Already I can feel a wedge driving between us. We killed our friend tonight. There's a stain on my soul I don't know if I'll ever recover from. I've never felt so dirty. So unfit to rule.

I look at Crallek's body, and then at Bastian. "Bury him in the graveyard. I'll have a headstone made."

Ari growls low under his breath, but I'm not having it.

I turn to my second, my lover, my best friend. "We defeated the leviathans because of Crallek. We never allowed his hunger for power to get to a point where others were hurt by it. He should be remembered as a hero."

There's a tense moment where Bastian looks between us, but then he scurries across the Great Hall's crushed shell floor, dragging Crallek's body

behind him. A stream of black blood follows. Chunks of coral from the vaulted ceiling above us drift down through the water as the castle slowly starts to break apart.

“Come,” I command my lover, focusing on him instead of the utter destruction around us. When I open my arms, he hesitates. Then he pumps his tailfin and comes to me, letting me enfold him in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, bringing my lips to the shell of his ear. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I know,” he exhales, resting his head on my shoulder as he wraps his arms around my waist. “I know, my king.”

We hold each other for a long moment, and then he pulls back, taking the shell pendant from my hand. I let it go reluctantly. He reaches up and places it around my neck, clasping it once more. Emerald eyes meet mine. Ari looks as uncertain as I feel.

The strength of Crallek’s power burns my skin from within the shell. I was never meant to carry it. The power is his. Like the syndicate, I never wanted it. The weight is heavy, the pendant like a noose around my neck.

And I have to wonder if, one day, it'll be my downfall.

Chapter 1

Ari

The sky is the same shade as the sea today. Gray. Heavy with the promise of rain. Something about that symmetry pleases me. I like balance.

I sift through the tangle of necklaces around my neck and find the clamshell pendant. I've been wearing it more often lately—sharing the burden of its weight with Triton. Voices aren't supposed to be heavy, but Crallek's is. It's a metaphysical weight, but it cuts deep. Sometimes it feels like the chain will slice through my skin and keep burrowing right down to the bone.

Seagulls circle overhead, shouting their complaints at me. I ignore them as I flick my tail fin on my rock. Although, it's not really a rock. It's a chunk of foundation from one of the skyscrapers that toppled into the sea when the humans nuked their world 180 years ago.

But it is *my* rock.

And this is my place—the one spot where I can be alone. Few among the Sea Syndicate venture to the surface. Even those of us who can shift to two legs generally avoid contact with humans and the bipedal monsters of the Myth. My merfolk clan is particularly loath to leave the water. I come from the Deep, where most other clans fear to tread.

But I don't mind the surface. It's an entirely different world compared to the sea.

In the distance, the highrises of the Sky Syndicate reflect the gray sky. As I watch, a massive construction crane slowly lifts a beam into the skeleton of a new building.

That's gargoyles for you. The acquisitive fuckers are always building new shit—probably because they can't stray from their nests. As a result, Gothel, the Lord of the Sky, is forever putting up new towers.

Although, word has it his latest acquisition is an entirely different kind of tower. News from the surface reaches us last, but it sinks down eventually. According to the latest gossip, Gothel mated Tower du Sang, the new leader of the du Sang vampire clan.

“Clan” being a euphemism for “criminal enterprise.” Because the two vampire factions sell power for profit. I wish I didn’t have firsthand knowledge of their operations, but I’ve dealt with the du Sangs a time or two. Paying for stolen power left a shitty taste in my mouth, but I gulped it down and did it anyway. Yet another thing that makes me a good second.

My fingers tighten around the pendant.

The crane continues its work. Inside the building, tiny figures grasp the end of the beam and haul it into place. When the building is finished, another skyscraper will pierce the sky, restoring more of the original Manhattan skyline.

Gothel's territory is the only part of the Hallows that resembles what used to be New York City. After the humans blew up the fucking planet, the Veil that separated the human realm from the “fairy tale” world of the Myth ripped. The two planes—which were never meant to mix—crashed together in an explosion of technology and magic.

Magic won. Some Myth scholars claim the monsters from the Old Country could have repaired the Veil. But that would have meant leaving the humans to their nuclear devastation. They wouldn’t have survived. So we rebuilt the human realm at the expense of our own.

To be honest, I’m not sure it was such a good idea. Because magic does freaky shit when it’s exposed to human tech. The combo definitely wreaked havoc with the Myth who inhabit the sea. Humans and Mythical bipedals may not have much in common, but they share an inexplicable reluctance to appreciate just how much the survival of life on the planet depends on the ocean staying healthy.

But of course, no one gives a shit what I think. For better or worse, Myth and humans live side by side now, with the four syndicate lords ruling their respective territories. Because it’s dangerous for immortal creatures to wield too much power, the lords share it, splitting their realms among the elements that correspond to their magic: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.

Waves lap at the edge of my rock, water splashing onto my tail and making the rainbow gleam brighter. Suddenly, the sun slips out from behind a cloud and sends a fat beam streaming straight down to my rock. I tip my head back and let my eyes slide shut. The sun's warmth sinks into my skin. *Solitude.* There’s nothing like it.

A shadow moves over my closed lids. Damn clouds.

“You’re beautiful,” a deep voice says.

My eyes fly open. I lift my head and meet the brilliant blue gaze of Triton, Lord of the Sea Syndicate. But he's more than that. To the merfolk, he's a king—the supreme ruler of all the various clans of mermen and sirens and other seafolk.

"And you're blocking my sun," I tell him.

The lord of the sea bobs beside my rock, his broad-shouldered torso dotted with shimmering droplets as he looks me over, unmistakable interest kindling in his ocean-blue eyes. "I've been searching all over for you. What are you doing up here?"

"Just thinking about how much I like being alone."

An easy smile curves his lips, exposing the tips of sharp fangs. I know exactly how sharp they are, having felt them on every inch of my body over the centuries we've been together. Triton may come from the fancy upper classes, but he certainly doesn't fuck like one. He's as dirty as any bottom-dweller I've met.

In a burst of rippling muscle, he heaves himself from the water and lands beside me. Tail flexing, he props his thick upper body on one elbow and faces me. As usual, he's pulled half of his hair back and fastened it with a twist of driftwood. The rest of his gray-streaked platinum hair streams over the golden mounds of his shoulders.

But I don't give a shit about his hair. I'm all about his round pecs and flat, pink nipples that beg to be sucked. Necklaces of various lengths decorate his broad chest. I want to wind them around his limbs and tie him up so I can take him apart. Delve into all his secret places and trace the peaks and valleys of his muscular body with my tongue.

Water nestles in the ridges of his abs and in the deep hollow of his navel. He's wet all over, the sea clinging to him like a lover reluctant to be parted. His tail is longer than mine, his scales a deep sapphire blue. I know if I run my hand down the front, I'll feel the slit that hides his pouch. Inside is a thick cock and a deep channel for fucking. I know that if I tease his slit open, I'll find him hard and wet. My favorite combination.

"You want to be alone?" he asks.

"Yeah. You might say I treasure my solitude. Like right now, for example."

"Liar," he whispers, and rolls on top of me. His lips seize mine as he gives me his full weight. He's too heavy for me, and he knows it.

He doesn't let that stop him. And neither do I.

The sharp edges of the rock prod my back, but I pay them no mind. Triton has my full attention. He's got my tongue, too, one fang scraping down the muscle. He leaves a sting in his wake and then sucks hard, drinking the little bit of blood he drew. He shoves his tongue halfway down my throat, choking me. Daring me to spit him out—or try to.

I grunt and tangle a hand in his hair, trying to guide his mouth to a more comfortable position.

He grunts right back. In a quick tussle, he captures both of my wrists and pins them above my head. He lifts away, eyes glittering with lust as he grinds his tail against mine.

"Fuck," I gasp, my dick swelling. Moisture flows to my channel, preparing me to fuck. Or be fucked. It could go either way with Triton. The fact that I never know which one of us will end up on top is part of our dynamic. We'll get there eventually, but not without a fight. That's part of our dynamic, too. And it has my dick pushing against my slit, eager for whatever kind of friction my king wants to give me.

He grinds harder, one of the deadly spine fins at his waist digging into my hip.

A sudden burst of light sparks between us.

The pendant, reflecting the sun.

Triton releases my wrists. He props himself on one forearm, his gaze on the pendant we both hate.

"Ignore it," I rasp. I grab his face and try to pull him back down. But he tugs his head from my grip. "Ignore it," I say again, hearing the edge in my voice. I reach for him.

He slaps my hand away. "You should let me wear it for a while. You burden yourself unnecessarily."

"I can handle it."

"I never said you couldn't."

Irritation rises hot and swift. We're quicker to argue these days. The Sea Syndicate is the wildest of the four, and Triton's grip on the throne is tenuous at best. He's under a lot of pressure. I shoulder as much as I can, but he's stubborn. Sometimes, I wonder if he thinks I can handle sharing his burdens.

And sometimes, when I lie awake at night in our bed, I wonder if he wants to. Because at his heart, Triton is a king. And I'm a nobody from the

fighting pits on the ocean floor. I'm good enough for some things, though. Like killing. He's never hesitated to let me do that.

He reaches for the pendant.

This time, *I* slap *his* hand away. "I'm fine," I say.

Blue eyes narrow. "Is that why you're up here alone? Because you're fine?"

"That's what I just said, my lord. Is there something wrong with your hearing?"

Anger flares in the brilliant blue. Slowly, he rubs his thumb along my upper lip, finding the thick edge of the scar that puckers my skin. He moves to my bottom lip and pinches hard, pulling until I'm forced to follow like a fish caught on a hook. He holds me like that, his big body pinning me and his fingers leaving my head suspended in mid-air. My mouth hangs open, my lip stretched to the point of pain. Humiliation shivers through me, tightening my dick.

"You are such a mouthy asshole," he whispers. He releases me, only to catch my nape on his palm. He replaces his fingers with his mouth, biting at the spot he just abused. "Disrespectful," he says between kisses and sharp nips. "Insubordinate. Cocky."

"You should fire me, then," I say, thrusting my hips against his. "Find someone who can give you more obedience."

"I'd rather force yours," he growls, then grabs my shoulders and flips us off the rock.

We hit the water with a splash, already grappling as we speed toward the ocean floor like a bullet. A lifetime of fighting has made me quick, and I dart behind him and throw an arm around his neck.

Just as quickly, he spins and punches my shoulder. Before I can recover, he twines his tail around mine.

Bliss rockets through me. A merman's tail is one big fucking erogenous zone. And Triton knows exactly how to stroke me. He uses his longer, thicker length to wrap me up from hip to fin. He squeezes, forcing my spines flat and locking my tail in a prison of blue scales. Then he rolls his hips, undulating around me. Fucking me with his whole body.

My groan is probably loud enough to be heard on the shore. My eyes slide shut, my irritation fading as desire takes over. Triton has always been the smarter between the two of us, and this proves it. He could have subdued me with his fists. Instead, he took the more pleasurable route.

I'm not complaining.

Our chests rub together. He splays one big hand across my back and uses his other to finger my slit. "Open for me."

For a moment, I resist. It's not my nature to give in so easily.

"Open up."

With a sigh, I relax the muscles that guard my slit, and he slides his big hand inside my pouch. I want his hand on my dick, but I know I'm not going to get it. Not after our exchange on the rock. I can push Triton pretty damn far, but he'll always retaliate. That doesn't mean I won't like it.

As expected, he bypasses my dick and pushes two thick fingers inside my channel. I've heard speculation that merman anatomy is responsible for humans mistaking us for sirens. I suppose I can understand why. But a merman's channel isn't the same as a pussy. I can't have babies, thank fuck. The last thing Triton and I need is a kid around. If we ever decide to raise one, we'll find a siren and do it by contract.

But I don't see that happening. I'd be a shit father, and Triton has enough on his plate.

His dick prods my opening, and my thoughts of offspring flow away like a riptide. He keeps on coming, pushing his cock inside in one smooth thrust. My dick is pinned between our stomachs like a lead pipe. My channel clamps hard around him, sealing us together.

He wraps both arms around me and rests his forehead against mine. "I don't like it when we fight."

I huff as I cling to his waist. "Then don't fight with me."

"Ari…" His sigh brushes my lips. My cheeks. The pendant is a small, hard presence between us. A rusty anchor embedded in my soul. But I don't tell Triton this. I keep it from him as much as I can. Because if he knew the truth, he'd order me to hand it over.

And another hard truth? I'm not sure he can tolerate the pendant's weight. He's stronger than I am. But his shoulders aren't broad enough for this burden.

Voices drift toward us—a reminder that there's always someone or something eager to demand the king's attention.

Triton's arms tighten around me. "I think I want some of that solitude you mentioned." Before I can respond, he swishes his tail in a mighty sweep.

We shoot to the surface in seconds. He pulls out and tosses me onto the rock, which still bears the watery outlines of our bodies. I sprawl on my back, my chest heaving from our rapid ascent.

Eyes half-lidded with lust, he thrusts a hand inside my slit and roughly gathers moisture from my channel.

Immediately, I know what he's up to.

"You think you're getting my ass?" I ask.

"That's exactly what I think." He sinks three fingers deep, pretty much sticking his whole hand inside me and making me suck in a sharp breath. "Decided I want something tighter around my dick." He withdraws and slaps my tail with his. "Turn over and shift."

I bare my fangs at him but do as he says, letting the transformation roll down my body. There's a brief moment when my brain can't remember how to work my legs. Then instinct takes over, and I go to my hands and knees.

Triton shoves my head down with a big hand between my shoulder blades. He spreads my ass wide with a palm on my cheek, then rubs my own moisture over my pucker. His foot lands on the rock next to my waist, and I feel the broad head of his cock prod my asshole.

Heat kisses my back as he curls his body over mine and begins pushing inside. "Should have made you suck my dick first," he growls. "Get inside all three of your holes to remind you who's in charge."

I bite my lip as my eyes water from the burn of his entry. "Don't act like I won't be inside your ass later. Or maybe I'll pound that tight channel until you squirt." He usually does. He doesn't even have to touch his dick. When I want him to suffer, I make sure he *can't* touch it. More than once, he's held court with rope burns around his wrists.

He smooths a suddenly gentle hand over my hip. "Relax," he murmurs, the growl in his voice replaced with something softer. He waits until I release a deep breath, and then he eases a little deeper. His cockhead brushes my gland, and my spine turns to lava. The burn melts into mind-bending pleasure.

"Oh fuck," I moan, squeezing my eyes shut against the bliss that blazes through me. My balls tighten. I reach back with both hands and spread my cheeks wider, holding myself open for him. "Give me all of it. I'm ready."

"You mean greedy," he rasps, but he obliges me. He seizes my hips and starts to pump, giving me every inch of his big dick. My own swings

between my legs, the tip dripping precum onto the rock. I want to touch myself, but I don't want to let go of my ass. I don't want to risk upsetting the ecstasy I'm feeling.

Triton understands my dilemma, because he reaches around and takes me in hand. He works his tight fist up and down my length, stroking me as he continues ramming my ass.

"Fuck!" I whine, swaying with his thrusts. Waves slap against the rock, the sound joining my cries and Triton's grunts. The rhythm of the waves matches his pace, and it's like the ocean itself is urging him on. Battering me as diligently as his cock spearing my hole.

"You going to come for me?" he growls.

"Yes. I can't hold on."

"Do it. Come for me."

I shoot all over his hand and the rock, emptying my balls on a shout so forceful it hurts my throat. He gives me a few more hard thrusts and then buries himself deep. We both cry out as his hot seed fills my ass. For one long moment, he rests his forehead against my shoulder.

When we catch our breath, we shift and splash back into the sea. We smile at each other as we swim, the tension from our spat behind us. The pendant feels lighter in the water. It's not so bad, really. Carrying it—and the power it contains—is just something I have to do. For the syndicate. For Triton. He's an annoying asshole, but I love him. I probably don't tell him enough.

I put it from my mind as we return to court. Side by side, we speed down hallways we rebuilt after we triumphed over the leviathans. Everything sparkles now. The underwater city is strong—a living fortress that centers Triton's power.

We reach the Great Hall, and Triton heads for the throne. I trail him, prepared to hover at his side while he conducts business.

But Bastian scuttles from the shadows, his expression more anxious than I've seen it in years.

Triton and I stop at once.

"What is it?" Triton demands. "Another uprising?" It's a valid question. The sharkmen have been giving us trouble lately.

Bastian shakes his head. He crosses to us. Looks from side to side and then lowers his voice to a whisper. "No, my lord. It's something much

worse, I’m afraid.” His voice dips lower, no more than a hint of sound. “The boy has found his voice.”

Chapter 2

Triton

A chill shoots down my backbone all the way to the tip of my tailfin. I'm taken immediately back to Crallek's last moments—to the way his voice broke as we stole it. The way his dark eyes went wide with anger and hurt, the way his tentacles suctioned onto me before he died.

"How do you know?" Ari's the first to speak, utterly focused on where Bastian hovers at the bottom of the stairs leading to my throne. A throne that's once again a brilliant, vibrant peach because of what we did all those years ago.

Bastian waves a claw, and the squadron of sea nymphs we assigned to watch over the child flit through the shadows and hover at his side. They're tiny, no bigger than my palm. Their long, thin tail fins wave anxiously as one darts forward, wringing its hands. I recognize this one as Dash, a leader of sorts. The nymphs don't really have power hierarchies—or individual personalities—but they typically appoint one among their number to speak for the group.

"Speak!" Bastian grunts, shoving Dash closer to Ari and me with one big foreclaw.

The sea nymph's pointed ears flatten against his head. His large, wide eyes dart side to side. The little male is clearly terrified, and the intense fury rolling off Ari like a tidal wave doesn't help.

I give Dash what I hope is an encouraging look. "You've guarded the child for over twenty years. What's changed?"

Sapphire-blue eyes set deep in a round face flick to Ari and back to me. Dash shudders once but speaks, his voice tinny and high-pitched. "The child came of age during the last shifting of the tides. He hasn't realized yet that his voice holds power. But we can sense it."

"How?" Ari's voice is cold as he crowds the sea nymph between our larger bodies. "What do you sense? Leave nothing out."

Dash lets out a terrified squeak, his spindly arms trembling as he meets Ari's hard gaze.

“It's all right,” I tell him. “Please tell us what you've seen.”

Dash glances at the school of nymphs hovering at his back. “We are drawn to power. Our numbers have grown in the twenty years we've guarded the child.” Dash swallows. “When he sleeps, his voice glows inside his throat.”

Ari narrows his eyes. “Do you care for him?”

My gut clenches. I know why he's asking. If the boy has grown powerful, he might have pulled the nymphs under his sway, transforming them from observers to accomplices. Ari's shoulders are tense, his body braced for a fight.

I shoot him a look to stand down, then focus on Dash. “Come with me, all of you.”

Ari makes an irritated sound but says nothing as the nymphs part around him, long tails fluttering as they obey my order.

“Come along,” I encourage, swishing my fins once as I head for the Great Hall doors. I point them out. “When we fought the leviathans, this whole castle died. Even the reef that surrounds the castle was desecrated. You probably remember that.”

“Yes, sire,” someone murmurs.

I gesture down the long, extravagant hallway ahead of us. Bright corals and waving anemone line the crushed shell walkway. I spin and swim backward as I continue leading them toward the exit, passing tall, open windows that let in a gently swaying current.

“Remember the holes that lined this hall? How every bit of coral was dead and gray after the leviathans attacked?”

The nymphs flutter as one, indicating they do remember.

I give them a harsh look. “We have kept the leviathans at bay for two decades. That’s why we have peace now. Crallek’s child coming into his voice puts all of that at risk. I cannot allow it. What, precisely, are we facing?”

Dash zooms to the front of the green- and blue-hued school. “He is not his father, sire, nor like the other sea witches we’ve come across in our many years. The boy is a simple person, happy to spend time tending to a garden and visiting a nearby shipwreck. He is curious, but…” When his voice trails off, I give him another stern look. Crallek’s son is the single biggest threat to my rule.

Dash swims quickly backward, his ears flattening. But he continues speaking, his voice pitched slightly lower. “The male is kind, Lord Triton. He is good to us, unlike his father.”

Ari huffs from behind the school, and they whip around in sync to look at him, before swirling just as quickly to face me.

“Go back to him now,” I tell Dash. “My instructions remain the same. Keep an eye on him and let me know if anything changes.”

Dash nods, and the nymphs behind him wave in agreement. As one, they turn and streak down the hallway, swimming through the double front doors and into the open sea.

I watch them go, lost in thought. Kind? Into gardening? I can’t imagine anything further from who Crallek was.

With a quick thrust of his fins, Ari comes to my side and gives me a look. *That* look. The one he gives me when he knows I’m going to tell him it’s time to do something unpleasant. He’s ready for it. He’s never hesitated when I’ve directed him to kill. But lately I find myself wondering what sort of toll those directives have taken on his happiness.

Bastian scurries up the hallway after us, his worried expression replaced with a sneer. “Gardening? Fucking gardening? Crallek is probably rolling over in his shallow grave.”

“Stop,” I say firmly. “Crallek is the reason we defeated the leviathans. He’s a hero.” That’s the public story I insisted on after we stole his voice. He did a lot of good before dark power polluted his mind.

Bastian’s scowl falls into something more neutral. After a second, he dips his head. But I don't miss the way he edges backward, putting distance between us. That gap has grown wider over the years. He's a good adviser, but he's never agreed with my decision to conceal Crallek's betrayal from the rest of the syndicate.

Ari crosses his big arms and gives me a pointed look. “We can’t let the child come into his voice. The outcome could be catastrophic. I’ll take care of it.”

The shell pendant around his neck gleams in the pale light that filters down from incandescent pendants above us. Its menace drifts around Ari, and for a moment, he seems to gleam too.

We probably *should* kill Crallek’s son. It's the responsible thing to do.

Bastian drifts forward. “What would happen if you simply stole his power?”

Ari goes still. “Triton.” His green eyes sharpen. “You can't possibly consider that as an option.”

But I do. And I have. More than once over the years, I've contemplated doing precisely what Bastian suggests. Bearing the boy's power in addition to Crallek's would be an immense burden, but it would make it that much easier for me to hold the leviathans in the trenches so I can maintain control. The sea is more or less safe as long as they’re not allowed to wake from their slumber.

Ari stares me down, anger huddling around him as he realizes I'm not going to agree with him.

Bastian scuttles back up the hallway. He never lingers when Ari and I fight.

“Tell me you’re not considering this,” Ari rasps. “It’s not worth it, Triton. It’s—”

“We could take it the same way we took Crallek’s.” I square my shoulders. “I will bear that burden if it keeps our hold on this syndicate intact.”

Ari's jaw tightens. “You’ve been considering this for a while. But you didn't tell me. Why?” He says the last as a command of his own, his tone flat—and hurt. He probably doesn't realize I can hear the latter.

I finger a large green pearl on a string around my neck. It’s my mating pearl. He’s got one, too, but somehow we never seem to find the right time to present them to one another.

His eyes drop to my fingers. His features soften, and his auburn lashes shield some of the hurt and anger in his eyes. But the tension in his jaw remains. Ari has never hesitated to eliminate threats. The gods know we live with plenty of them. Any minute, he's going to lift his head and argue that we should simply kill Crallek's son and rid the syndicate of the problem his existence poses. He's going to press me to issue an order. *Kill the boy.*

But I can't. I don't want to order Ari to kill again.

Haven’t we given enough to the sea? The other syndicate lords have no fucking clue what it costs us to maintain a hold down here. The constant uprisings, the ever-present threat of the leviathans and their desire to escape the trenches. The shell pendant that glitters around Ari’s muscular neck is a brutal reminder of the toll of power.

I draw a deep breath and answer him at last. “I didn't want Crallek coming between us more than he already has.” As Ari's brow furrows, I

press on. “I want you to go visit the boy.”

The crease between his brows deepens. “What? *Now?*”

“The nymphs claim the boy is kind. If that’s true, perhaps there’s an alternative path.”

“Like what?” Ari shakes his head, disagreement huddling around him like a cloak. "We've already imprisoned him. What if we find out too late that he’s not nearly as kind as the sea nymphs believe?”

“Then we’ll kill him.”

Ari purses his lips. I brace for an argument—and for a minute, he seems ready to give it to me—but then he clamps his mouth shut. He does that a lot lately, answering me with silence. And I can't help but wonder if this is another consequence of taking Crallek's power. There was a time when Ari delighted in challenging me. Our relationship has always been about push and pull. But more and more, he turns away instead of leaning in. I see it now in the way he shifts his strong, beautiful tail so that he’s angled slightly away from me. In the way he’s spending longer stretches of time on the rock above the surface, embracing solitude.

Crallek’s power is a burden I would bear alone if I could. It's a knife slowly twisting its way into our hearts—and I worry it'll cut too deep one day.

Ari has never been one to respond to pretty words. He's a male who appreciates action. So I’ve always strived to give him that. I do it now, drifting forward and unclasping the shell pendant from his neck. I ease back and watch as an invisible weight lifts from him. He sighs, rolling his shoulders and angling his head from side to side.

I fix the pendant around my neck. Immediately, its weight threatens to drag my head down.

“It’s getting worse,” Ari says, his green eyes moving over me. “It didn’t used to feel so heavy.” He opens his mouth to say more, but then seems to think better of it. Pale lashes flutter against sun-kissed cheeks covered in a smattering of freckles. It’s the only thing belying the time he spends in the world above the water.

“Go,” I say softly. “Observe him. I want you to assess the threat before we decide what to do.” Before *I* decide is more accurate. Because at the end of the day, even if Ari disagrees, he’ll do whatever I tell him to do.

He nods. I lean in to kiss him, but he doesn’t meet me halfway like usual. Grabbing both of his waist spines, I yank him hard to my chest. Still,

he looks off into the distance, auburn tresses waving in the soft current that flows through the coral windows.

“Do you want me to go?" I ask. "I will.”

He gives me a disdainful look. "You're not putting yourself in danger like that." He shoves against me, pushing out of my embrace with an irritated slap of his tailfin against mine. He lifts a muscular arm and pushes his hair back. “I guess we always knew this might happen.”

“We did. That’s why I kept du Sang’s siphoning spell. If we need it again, it’s locked in the vault.”

If Ari is surprised I kept the spell, he doesn't show it. He hates the vault. I think it’s a reminder of the vast differences between his upbringing and mine.

He touches the spot where the shell pendant rested against his neck, then turns and swims slowly to the end of the hall. When he reaches the doorway, he pauses and meets my gaze over his shoulder. His tail moves lazily, stirring up shells from the sandy floor below. “I love you,” he murmurs. “I was thinking earlier that I don’t tell you enough.”

He doesn’t wait for me to respond. With a quick swish of his shimmering scales, he’s out the door and taking off into the dark waters beyond our castle.

“I love you too,” I sigh into the empty hall.

Chapter 3

Ursan

"It's a good day for digging!" I call as I exit my cave and head toward the shipwreck. I'm not sure if the sea nymphs are nearby today, but I'm betting they are. They weren't around at all yesterday, and it's rare for them to skip a day without swimming past my place. For some reason I haven't been able to figure out, they like me.

Although, I suspect they feel safe with me. Judging from the hints they've dropped here and there, the rest of the sea isn't as calm as my cave. And the nymphs are delicate little things.

No one could ever say that about me. I haven't always known what I look like. Up until a few years ago, I didn't think about it much. Then I found the whatzit. Like a lot of my other treasures, it came from the surface. The sea nymphs call most of the stuff that floats down "junk," but they're wrong. The things I discover are fascinating, even if I don't always know what they're supposed to do. Trying to figure it out is one of the ways I entertain myself. Fortunately, the surface seems to have an endless supply of treasure.

I swim to the wreck and dart into the quarterdeck, my ears pricked for the nymphs. It's quiet outside, so I make my way to the captain's cabin and stop before the whatzit.

When I first discovered the whatzit, I was frightened by what I saw. But after a few hand gestures and facial expressions, I realized the whatzit is…me. Or at least a reflection of me.

I'm tall and muscular, with dark eyes and dark hair that waves when the sea plays with it. My face isn't bad to look at, I guess, but my tattoos are undeniably eye-catching.

At least, they catch *my* eye whenever I pass the whatzit. According to the sea nymphs, someone has to give you a tattoo. It's not like they just appear out of nowhere. But no matter how hard I search my memory, I can't recall receiving the dark ink that covers my chest and stretches down both

arms. The designs must be spelled somehow, because they've grown with me, adjusting as my body got bigger.

The whatzit isn't long enough to show anything below my hips, but I don't need a reflection for that. I like to think I'm pretty modest, but I have to admit I'm proud of my tentacles. They're so beautiful to me—eight long, flexible appendages that curl and twist in response to my unspoken commands. When I was younger, they were solid black. But they changed with age, shifting to a deep, shimmering purple underneath. Suckers line the undersides, letting me climb and grip. I stick a couple to the whatzit now, then pull back, smiling at the series of *pops* that echo through the cabin.

Sound is such a joyful thing. On those rare days when the nymphs don't show up, I keep myself company by singing. I'm not sure if I'm any good, but the nymphs seem to think so. I'll never admit it, but sometimes I think the flowers in my little garden bloom brighter when I sing to them.

And, lately, as weird as it sounds, I can almost swear the most stubborn buds bloom at the mere sound of my voice. Every other year, I've had a few duds that just never show their petals. But this year, my garden has been a riot of color—with not a single reluctant bud among the bunch.

"Ursan!" a chorus of familiar voices calls from outside.

My reflection in the whatzit grins. "I knew you couldn't stay away," I murmur, then I twist and propel myself up and out of the cabin. When I reach the quarterdeck, I pull my tentacles close and spin, whirling upward in a flurry of bubbles. I'm showing off, but the sea nymphs like it, so I do a few more maneuvers before flinging my tentacles out and coming to a stop in front of the shipwreck.

Dozens of deep-blue eyes watch me from cheery, round faces. The nymphs' tails wag excitedly, and Dash darts forward and offers me a bow.

"Impressive, Ursan, sir," he says in his slightly high-pitched voice. "You could be an acrobat."

I chuckle. "I don't know what that is, so I'm going to have to take your word for it."

Dash glances at the others behind him. "Acrobats tumble and flip. They do stunts. On the surface, they're sometimes called gymnasts."

"Sounds fun," I say, and head toward my favorite digging spot. I thrust a tentacle deep into the sand and dig around, searching for treasure.

Dash follows, the rest of the group quickly falling into formation behind him. They watch me dig for a minute, and then Dash asks, "Don't

you want to visit the surface? See an acrobat for yourself?"

"Nope." I pull my tentacle from the seabed, scoot around to another spot, and punch back down. A cloud of sand puffs from the impact and eddies around me.

As one, the nymphs dart out of the way. "Why not?" Dash asks.

I shrug. "I'm happy here." But even as I say it, I know it's a lie—or at least an evasion. The truth is…I'm scared. For as long as I can remember, I've been alone.

Well, that's not totally true, either. I have vague memories of a male who looked like me. Sometimes when I dream, I reach that in-between state where I know I'm sleeping but I'm also kind of awake. It's in those moments that I see him, and I remember swimming at his side and listening to him speak. He had a deep voice. I remember that much. His tentacles were purple underneath, too.

But dreams are funny things. They're not reliable. On the handful of occasions I asked the sea nymphs about him, they apologized and said they didn't have any information for me. So I stopped asking.

"But aren't you curious?" Dash presses. "Wouldn't you like to leave your cave?"

I shake my head, and I keep it down as I dig so he and the others won't see the blush I can feel spreading over my cheeks. I'm not proud of my fear, but I've accepted it. Like my tattoos and my dark hair and my tentacles, my anxiety is part of me. It's probably been with me longer than anything else, to be honest. I don't remember a time when I wasn't terrified at the thought of swimming past the coral that surrounds my cave and the wreck. To my shame, I can't even go near it without feeling sick.

Not that I haven't tried. A few years ago, when I was newly twenty and feeling like I was old enough to conquer my irrational fear once and for all, I sped toward the coral as fast as I could.

I got the tip of one tentacle on the barrier before I vomited and passed out. The nymphs never said anything, but I'm convinced they dragged me into my cave and cleaned me up, because I woke on my shell bed under a blanket of seaweed.

I look at the little group now, gratitude swelling in my chest. Despite all my oddities, they've been good friends over the years. My *only* friends. "Hey guys," I say softly. "And gals," I add, darting a look at the females

with their slightly darker blue fins. “Thanks for stopping by today. I enjoy your company.”

The nymphs exchange looks. A murmur ripples through them, and then Dash zooms forward and brushes a slender hand down my shoulder. “We like you too, Ursan.”

I curl the tip of one tentacle into a tight coil and knock it against his miniature tailfin. “Fist bump, right?” It’s a surface phrase he taught me.

For a second, his eyes seem sad. But then he smiles, and I’m sure I imagined it. “Yes,” he says. “You remembered.”

Deep under the seabed, my tentacle hits something solid. With a whoop, I pull it from the sand, brandishing a shiny, silver object. It’s small, about seven inches or so in length. The nymphs and I peer at it.

“What do you think this thing is called?” I ask.

A shiver runs through the school. One by one, the nymphs shake their heads. Dash frowns. “We don’t know that one, Ursan, sir.”

“Hmm.” I prod the three spiky points at the top with another tentacle. “It’s sharp! What a weird…thing. Hey, we could call it a *thingamabob*.”

Dash looks skeptical. “I don’t know…”

“What do you think it’s for?” I turn it this way and that, examining it from different angles. “A weapon, maybe.”

“It’s a *fork*,” a deep, irritated-sounding voice says.

I whirl. The nymphs whirl with me, but I barely notice. Because my full attention is on the big, emerald-eyed stranger hovering at the edge of my garden. He’s a bit like the nymphs but also nothing like them. For one thing, he’s huge. He’s just as big as I am, but he’s far scarier than I’ve ever looked in the whatzit.

But he’s also beautiful. Red hair is shaved close to the sides of his head, with the top part left a little longer. It waves in the sea, the vibrant color like the flag that used to adorn my wreck before the current unraveled it. Like the nymphs, he’s got one tail, but his is long and muscular and covered in bright green scales the same shade as his eyes.

He doesn’t have tattoos, but what he has is just as compelling. Thick shoulders and big arms. A broad chest and flat, pink nipples. Rippling abs I have the most shocking desire to trace with my tongue.

I bite the organ in question so I don’t say something stupid.

I’m staring. No, I’m *gawking*. And I know it’s rude, but I can’t seem to stop.

“Who are you?” I blurt at last.

The beautiful creature folds his arms, his scowl doing nothing to diminish his beauty. “You can call me Ari. I’m here to ask questions, and you’re going to answer them.”

“Why?”

His scowl deepens. “Because your king commands it, boy. And so do I.”

Chapter 4

Ari

Crallek's son stares at me like he's seen a ghost. I know how he feels, because seeing him brings back a flood of memories. Good times with his father, before the allure of power warped Crallek's mind. Before Triton and I started finding the bodies Crallek left behind. Before duty demanded we stop him from turning the sea red with blood.

On the other hand, this kid is different. He must take after his mother, because he doesn't look all that much like Crallek. He's not much of a "kid," either. I do the math quickly in my head. He's got to be twenty-six or twenty-seven by now. A baby by Myth standards, but a grown male nevertheless. Certainly old enough for his power to have matured—and become a threat.

Reminded of why I'm here, I advance forward, moving past a vibrant-looking garden and a sandy stretch of seabed littered with so much surface junk the place looks like a human yard sale. The sea nymphs move closer to Ursan like they mean to protect him. It was probably a mistake to appoint them the boy's guardians. They can hold their own in a fight, but they're not naturally aggressive.

They're also extremely perceptive, and I don't doubt for a minute they've been aware of my presence this whole time. I make a mental note to ask Bastian how much time they've been spending with the boy. I didn't miss the way Dash quizzed Ursan about whether he'd like to leave the cave. I'm not a genius, but I'm not stupid, either. The nymphs wanted me to hear Ursan's answer.

For now, I give them a meaningful look. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

A shiver ripples through them. Dash glances between Ursan and me. He opens his mouth like he means to argue.

"Let me rephrase that," I say, and I jerk my head toward the open sea behind us. "Go find somewhere else to be. The kid and I need to talk."

Little faces turn toward each other, wariness in dozens of big, round eyes.

"*Just* talk," I add, exasperation rising. I wave a hand toward the sea. "Go on," I say a bit more softly. "There's nothing to worry about."

With a final look at Ursan, the nymphs swim off, green-blue tails cutting a quick path through the sea. I watch them go to make sure none of them peel away from the group and dart into the shipwreck. When they're out of sight, I turn back to Ursan, who's staring at me with the same arrested expression he's worn since the moment I showed myself.

"You want to ask me questions," he says. His tone is curious, and maybe even a little disbelieving. He runs his gaze down my body, blatant admiration in his dark eyes. The damn things are his best feature—chocolate and sort of liquid. Melted chocolate, I guess. The color should be boring and ordinary, but it's not, maybe because his lashes are so thick and long.

I shake myself, ready to bark at him to stop sizing me up. But that's not what he's doing. He's not checking me out in preparation to fight. He's just checking me out.

"Don't do that," I snap.

He brings his head up sharply, and his stupid melted chocolate eyes blink a few times. "Do what?"

"Stare at me."

"You don't want me to look at you?" There's no defensiveness in the question. Just surprise. And a whole world of curiosity.

"No. I mean, yes, you can. Just not—" I clamp my mouth shut, a growl brewing in my chest. I swallow it and let a sigh emerge instead. I cast a look over the cave and the junk-strewn sand in front of it. "How about you show me around your place? It looks…interesting."

His face brightens. "You really think so?"

"Sure."

He beams at me, flashing a white-toothed grin that has me staring all over again. His skin is olive-toned, as if he's spent a lot of time in the sun, which I know he hasn't. But the contrast between all that tan skin and his white, even teeth is distracting as hell.

I frown.

He swallows. "All right. Um, I guess we'll start with the cave?"

"Okay."

“Well…right this way, then.” He tosses me a shy smile and swims forward, tentacles waving like one of those big yellow dogs I’ve seen on the surface. I follow, and I bite back the urge to lay into him for inviting a total stranger into his home. And not even a nice stranger. It’s not like I popped over his coral with a plate of cookies. I could have killed him a dozen times by now, and he doesn’t appear to realize it.

Inside the cave, he whirls and sweeps his arms out. “Here it is! It’s kind of cluttered at the moment. I just brought in a new haul.”

Cluttered is an understatement. The place is packed with twice as much crap as the sandy yard outside. From what I can tell, it’s all surface junk—land-dweller garbage that finds its way down to the bottom. It’s worthless, useless stuff. But Ursan doesn’t seem to view it that way. He darts from one pile to the next, pointing out various shiny objects.

“I’ve got some gadgets here…and a few gizmos.” He turns his back to me as he paws through a pile, muttering, “I thought I had a—ah, found it!” He turns and holds up a pair of sunglasses. “*Whozits*,” he says, waving the glasses a little. He offers me another shy smile. “I’ve got like twenty of these somewhere.”

“Sunglasses.”

“I’m sorry?”

“That…*those* aren’t”—I force myself to repeat the nonsense word he’d used—“whozits. They’re sunglasses. Humans wear them.”

His smile fades, and two spots of color appear high on his cheeks. Slowly, he tucks his hand holding the glasses behind him. “Yeah, I…don’t always know the proper names for things. I ask the sea nymphs sometimes, but there’s so much stuff, you know?” He gives a soft, self-conscious laugh. “They already tell me I ask too many questions.”

I watch as he turns and carefully sets the glasses on top of a pile. At first glance, the mounds of junk looked unorganized, but now I can see there’s a method to his piles. And everything is meticulously clean. The trash sparkles, as if he’s spent hours scrubbing it. Shit, he probably has. What else is he going to do in this place?

He brings a hand up and rakes it through his dark hair. Against my will, I let my eyes wander down the thick curve of his bicep. He’s been doing push-ups in between polishing his trash heap, because his chest looks like it was carved from shale. It’s also covered in ink. More tattoos run down his muscular arms, and a few trail down the sharp ridges of his abs.

Sea witch markings, spelled onto his skin as an infant. Some are records of his lineage. Others advertise his power and serve as a warning to anyone stupid enough to fuck with him.

He wears the ink well. I wonder if he knows what any of it means.

He clears his throat, and I realize he's lowered his hand and is now giving me an expectant look like he's waiting for me to say something. Probably because I'm eyeing him like a piece of meat.

For the life of me, I can't remember where our conversation left off, so I blurt out the first thing that pops into my head. "What about that shipwreck out there? Is there more shi— Um, stuff in it?"

"Yes." He smiles and shrugs those big shoulders. "I'm a bit of a collector."

"No kidding."

He hooks a thumb toward the cave's entrance. "Do you want to…?"

"Yeah," I say gruffly, pulling my eyes off his mouth. "If you don't mind showing me," I add before I can stop myself. I frown at how passive I sound, but I guess it's better than sounding like a dick. Not that the kid would know the difference.

He moves past me. "I don't mind." At the entrance, he winks at me over his shoulder. "I mean, I'm pretty open today, so I guess I can squeeze in a quick tour." He heads toward the wreck.

And that wink has me feeling a little wrecked as I trail him. The kid doesn't know what sunglasses are, but he knows how to flirt? Am I losing my mind? And why is my dick suddenly *very* interested in seeing more piles of garbage?

Halfway to the shipwreck, a pile of sand catches my eye. Only it's not a pile. Someone has rolled up three balls of sand and placed them one on top of the other. Small, black seashells march down the front of the middle ball. The ball on top wears a seashell smile. A piece of driftwood protrudes from the corner of its mouth like a pipe.

The kid made a snowman—*sandman*—in his fucking front yard.

Up ahead, Ursan turns and cups his hands around his mouth. "You coming, Ari?"

The sound of my name on his lips jolts me. I flick my tail once and speed to him in seconds. As I arrive in a rush of bubbles, he gives me an appreciative look. "You're one of the merfolk, yes?"

Well, *there's* a word he knows. Thank you, sea nymphs, I guess. "A merman, yes. Sirens are—"

"The females. Right." He swallows, and a bit of that dusky pink stains his cheeks again. "The Folk prefer their own kind for…?" He trails off, the flush spreading down his neck. He's got a bit of ink there, too, and it's a complete mind fuck seeing such a big, powerful-looking male so tongue-tied about sex. "I'm sorry," he murmurs. "The nymphs mentioned it once, and I've always kind of wondered."

Something inside me loosens, and it makes my voice gentle. "It's all right to wonder. The answer to your question is yes. Merfolk prefer their own sex. We switch teams for reproduction, but that's about it."

He laughs, a deep rumble that vibrates the sea between us. Those chocolate-brown eyes crinkle at the corners as he says, "*Switch teams*. That's a good phrase. I'm going to remember that one."

His delight is so unguarded and genuine, I find myself smiling back. "And sunglasses."

"And fork," he says, and a fucking dimple appears in his cheek.

Fucking shit.

I gesture to the wreck behind him. "You going to show me this place, or what?"

"Yeah. Come on, Ari." He waves me after him, and I do my best not to freak out as he leads me through various levels of the ship. As expected, it's overflowing with surface junk he's collected over the years. He points out items as we move from room to room, telling me the names he's given them and then waiting for me to correct him. He doesn't get offended or angry when I do.

On the contrary, I can see him cataloging every word in his mind, storing up knowledge the same way he does his treasures. An hour passes, then two, and I become certain of several things. Crallek's son lives a simple life, but he's not simple. He's fiercely intelligent and curious about the world. He's polite—charming, actually—and shockingly sociable for someone who's been alone his whole life.

There's something else I'm certain of, and it's the very last thing I need to think about right now—or any time, for that matter.

Ursan most definitely plays for my team, and he's not interested in switching.

I shove that thought down deep as he guides me to a captain's cabin and stops before an elegant mirror. We stand side by side, our shoulders almost touching.

In the mirror, Ursan gives me one of those disarming smiles. He reaches up and runs reverent fingers down the mirror's scrolling frame. "This is my favorite thing I've pulled from the sand." He hesitates. "I've always called it a whatzit, but…" He looks at me and waits.

For some reason, I don't want him to change this word. I stare at him for a moment, and then shift my gaze to my reflection. My green eyes stare back at me. Red hair floats away from my head. My scar starts just underneath my nose and carves a path down my upper lip. The skin there is puckered a bit. Triton likes it.

"Ari?"

I flick my gaze to Ursan, who's staring at my lip in the mirror. Curiosity sparks in his eyes, but he doesn't say anything. And he won't, I realize. He's too kind to invade my privacy that way.

"It's a scar," I say. "An old wound." Absently, I finger the hard ridge, which is still a little numb after all these years. "The squid who gave it to me had poison in his claws. That's why it won't heal. It was against the rules to use poison, but his handler had a lot of money on the fight, so he cheated."

Confusion flits through Ursan's eyes. "People pay to fight?"

"In the Deep, they do." And I'm not sure why I'm talking about this. It's a can of worms I never open. Memories I prefer to forget. But when the curiosity burns brighter in Ursan's eyes, I keep going. "I was born one level above the trenches. Do you know what that means?"

He nods solemnly. "The lowest reaches of the Deep, where no light gets in. The nymphs say the Folk who live that far down are vicious."

"Yeah, well, they're right. The Deep was a shitty place to grow up. There's not much to do, so people entertain themselves at the fighting pits. There's good money in it, and it's common for mermen to contract with sirens to produce sons who can fight. I spent my childhood and teen years in the pits."

Ursan absorbs this, his emotions parading through his eyes one after another. Sympathy and fear and horror. Reading him is easy because he's not used to hiding the way he feels. It's refreshing, but also terrifying

because he's so fucking vulnerable. If he ever leaves his cave and coral, he'll get eaten alive.

His gaze lowers to my scar again. "Did you…like fighting?"

"I was good at it." I gesture to my lip. "Except this one time."

"Well, the squid cheated," Ursan huffs. "What an asshole."

A bark of laughter escapes me before I can stop it. "Yeah. He was."

"Did you make him pay for it?"

"I killed him," I say bluntly.

"Good."

We grin at each other. And by some unspoken agreement, we both turn to the mirror.

He studies my face for a moment, then says, "I like it, Ari. The scar."

So does Triton.

The pleasant, slightly lazy feeling of camaraderie flees. This isn't why I came here. I didn't visit Crallek's son to share my life story and gaze at each other in a fucking mirror. I came here to serve my king and assess a threat.

I back away. "I have to go."

"You do?" Panic shades Ursan's eyes. "But you'll come back, right?"

"Yeah…" I pump my tail fin and keep moving backward. "Sure, I'll come back. We'll talk…later." I turn and prepare to put on a burst of speed. I need to get the fuck out of here and back to Triton.

"Hey, Ari?"

My voice is sharp as I face Ursan. "What is it?"

His brow furrows. "Sorry, I just…" He tips his head toward the mirror. "I wondered if you could tell me what this is called? Its real name, I mean. I like to know…so I don't sound stupid."

"Mirror," I rasp. "It's a mirror."

Then I turn and swim quickly from the shipwreck. And as I make my way back to the castle, I know Triton and I have a major problem on our hands. Because Ursan isn't the villain I expected him to be.

But as he asked about the mirror just now, his voice changed. Went deeper. Hummed with power. He showed no sign of hearing it, but I did. Bastian was right. Ursan is coming into his power.

And it will only continue to grow.

Chapter 5

Triton

I swim slowly down the coral hall behind my throne. Two mermen pass me and wave, their smiles infectious as they head toward the wing of the castle where the private rooms are located. The castle is almost completely restored after two decades of coral growth. The clan is growing too. Our numbers aren't fully recovered, but we're getting there as more children reach adulthood.

Normally, I admire how beautifully vibrant and alive the castle is these days. Voices echo down the hall from the kitchen where the chef is preparing dinner. My clan thrives. We won against the leviathans all those years ago.

But somehow, it doesn't feel like a win when my closest relationships are more strained than ever. And now the topic of Crallek's son is back to haunt me like the ghost of his long-dead father.

I grit my teeth when I realize I don't even know the child's name. He's been captive in his cave all these years with the help of a siren spell designed to keep him from leaving the area. Bastian didn't even want to send the sea nymphs to watch over the boy. My advisor argued bitterly against it, claiming the child's very nature would eventually cause him to corrupt the nymphs. But I disregarded his advice, creating a rift between us that hasn't healed.

Shaking those hated memories away, I pump my tail fins a little harder. The shell around my neck feels like an ocean liner's anchor weighing me down. When I reach the end of the hall, I stop at a vault door. It's a safe door from a sunken wreck reinforced with a healthy new growth of coral and anemones. To anyone else it would look like a decorative part of the hallway.

To me, it's a doorway to hell.

Shoving my hand between two pieces of wavy pink coral, I find a hidden latch and pull it. With a big heave, I haul the door open and slip inside, closing it behind me. As I move down a short hallway, iridescent

anemones come alive and light the way for me. By the time I reach the cavernous room at the end, the whole place is ablaze with the anemones' light.

I cast my gaze around my private vault, admiring the riches I've collected over the years. Everything of value is stored here. Ari, Bastian, and I are the only ones with access to it, although Ari rarely ventures inside.

Sighing, I swim past stacks of waterlogged paintings and gold bullion. Chests overflowing with gems twinkle at me as I pass. A marble statue of a handsome young king gleams in the anemones' light, his hand propped playfully on his hip. Ari found it after a shipwreck. He seemed enamored with it, so I kept it. I touch the string that holds my mating pearl, rubbing at it as I think back to the way he lost interest in the statue after a while.

My tail dredges up lazy swirls of sand as I pick my way around treasure piles. At last, I see it—my most hated possession.

A giant clamshell sits on a pedestal in the center of the room, its frilled halves tightly closed. Giant clams are an oddity of the sea, rare and sought after by humans. They've been the centerpiece in several cultures' origin stories. They've served as baptismal fonts. They've even been considered containers of the gods.

Ignorance.

It's all bullshit the humans made up. They never cease to amaze me, even after all the years I've spent watching them from the sea. They're lucky the syndicates were willing to keep the peace in this world, otherwise they'd be mired down with war after war, just as they were before the Veil fell and the creatures of the Myth saved them from their own idiocy.

Grimacing, I lift the shell pendant from my necklaces and grip it tightly. Instantly, I feel the steady thrum of Crallek's voice. It aches to escape its shell—and me. But I've ensured there's nowhere for it to go. I stand in front of the huge clamshell and depress a small button on its gnarled, gray side. The ruffled lips open, revealing a silvery pool filling the bottom.

The pool's surface shimmers, and then a vision appears—the leviathans contained in an uninhabited trench far away from anything else. They slumber, their giant, bulbous figures floating in the most remote part of the ocean. Confined to their prison, they're unable to rise and wreak havoc. But their sleep endures only as long as I continue to persuade them

with Crallek's power. Lately, I've felt compelled to check on them with increasing frequency.

My muscles tremble. Ari helps me bear the weight of Crallek's voice, but *using* it is something I do alone. In the past, I could speak the power of persuasion without any magical assistance. But these days, I need help.

Reaching for a second necklace, I grip a small vial of siren blood I possess courtesy of Lucius du Sang. I unstopper the vial and tip my head back, counting six droplets as they hit my tongue.

As always, the siren's blood is both cloyingly sweet and horribly bitter. It congeals in my mouth, and for a moment the instinct to spit it out is overpowering. Then it sinks into my tongue, sending siren power screaming through my veins. I curl forward, panting as I let the borrowed power settle. My head pounds, and my stomach pitches, but I ride out the discomfort.

I despise paying that fucking criminal, Lucius du Sang, to siphon siren power for me. Everything about that transaction feels like a violation against the Folk. But like so many of the things I have to do, I do it for the benefit of my people and the syndicate. Without the blood, I'm not certain I could wield Crallek's power.

Peering into the shimmery pool inside the clamshell, I hold Crallek's voice in my hand and begin to speak, drawing on his power. I speak the words Crallek himself taught me to coerce the leviathans to remain in the deep. This was his task when he was in his right mind. He used his gift to protect the sea. And now that he's gone, it falls on me to keep the leviathans in slumber. If I don't "persuade" them regularly, they'll rise up and cause war again.

"You only took three drops, right?" Ari's voice echoes through the glittering, treasure-filled chamber. I finish my incantation, watching as the leviathans shudder but remain dormant. When I'm convinced they're subdued, I close the shell and face Ari.

His presence in the vault is a bad sign. Ari dislikes treasure. Wealth makes him uncomfortable, although he'll never admit it. I suspect he resents the idea of being "kept." It's not even something we can talk about, since he'd take offense at the mere suggestion that our relationship works that way. Years ago, some dickhead member of the clan insinuated it. Ari let him live but sent him away minus a tongue, ensuring he'll never insinuate anything ever again.

"Give me the bad news first," I say. "You met the child?"

Ari nods and folds his arms. The move accentuates his muscular biceps and sends tendrils of desire snaking through me. “The kid hasn’t come fully into his power, but I heard it when I was there. It’s just like Crallek’s, the way his voice goes deeper when he’s using it. But…” Ari trails off, and he unwraps his arms to run both hands through his hair.

“What is it?” I ask.

His expression grows thoughtful—and troubled. “He’s not what I expected. He lives a simple life, but he’s highly intelligent. Curious.”

“You liked him.” I say the words and hope they don’t sound like I’m blaming Ari. With a swish of my tailfin, I cross the space between us, forcing him to back up against a painting of a buxom duchess.

His auburn brows knit together like he’s struggling to figure out how he feels. Eventually, he releases an even breath. “I think you should meet him. He’s not what I expected. He lacks Crallek's sharp edges.”

“Crallek wasn’t an asshole when we were younger,” I remind him. “The power twisted him until we barely recognized him. That happened later.”

“I know,” Ari says. “I was there. It’s just…”

“Just what?” I demand, apprehension building. Ari left the castle telling me I was making a mistake not to kill the kid. Now he's defending him? “What happened while you were gone?” I ask more sharply than I intend.

Irritation sparks in Ari's eyes. “What happened is I visited him like you ordered me to.”

“And you liked him.”

“He's different from Crallek,” Ari insists.

My apprehension doesn't go anywhere. “You said he used his power. Is it possible he persuaded you to like him?”

Now, Ari's green eyes turn frosty. He slaps his tailfin against mine, nudging me backward. “I said he hasn't come fully into his power. I think I'm safe.”

No one is safe with a sea witch around. In some clans, fathers scare their sons away from riptides by telling them sea witches dwell in the dangerous currents.

“I'll meet him,” I say. “Right now.”

“Now?”

“That's what I just said.” I turn and swim for the door. Ari catches up quickly and then radiates tension as he swims at my side.

An apology hovers on my lips. Ari is angry with me for suggesting he fell under the boy's spell. But he's never hesitated to kill for our clan or the syndicate. I don't know what's behind his sudden change of heart, but I'm not wasting any time getting to the bottom of it.

“His name is Ursan,” Ari mutters as we move through the castle.

I give a noncommittal grunt. The boy's name doesn't matter. Only what he's capable of.

We leave the castle, and I pump my tail harder as we speed toward our protective reef. Despite the siren blood running through my veins, the shell pendant around my neck drags me down.

Just before we reach the open ocean, I stop and put a hand on Ari's shoulder. “I'm sorry." I swallow hard. “The siren blood…”

Some of the frost in his eyes thaws. “It tires you.” He searches my face. “Maybe we should wait—”

“No.” I squeeze his shoulder and turn toward the sea. “Let's get this over with,” I say, swimming forward before he can try to persuade me to stay.

Persuasion. The last thing either of us needs.

An hour later, I follow Ari along the edges of a vibrant coral reef teeming with life. We’re almost there. I know what I'll see when we round the far edge of the reef. A big shipwreck, and behind that, the cave where Crallek’s son has lived his whole life, trapped by a siren’s spell.

Guilt prickles over my skin. It was easier when the child was out of sight. The sea nymphs kept an eye on him, and I could put him out of my mind. Now that I'm about to see him face to face, my gut churns. I want to be anywhere but here. But of course, that's not an option. I’m the king of my clan and the Lord of the Sea Syndicate. My wants come last.

When I look over at Ari, I’m surprised to find he looks as apprehensive as I feel.

He doesn’t pause at the end of the reef. Just shoots me a quick look and swims over it.

I guess we're doing this.

Gritting my teeth, I follow him—and stifle a gasp.

Down below, in the middle of a lush garden, a male hovers over a tight row of red sea whips. His upper body is covered in tattoos. He's all tan, supple skin and muscles that carve down to a trim waist before flaring out into eight powerful tentacles.

From afar, he reminds me so much of his father.

The lush corals in front of him wave on a gentle current as the male speaks softly under his breath.

Ari clears his throat, and the spell is broken. The male straightens. He spots us, and then his face splits in a grin. He moves quickly toward us, his tentacles propelling him across the sea bed. There's no fear in his eyes. No concern, no worry. Just blatant surprise and interest.

He's bigger than Crallek. Brawnier. He reaches us in no time.

And he looks thrilled. "I didn't expect to see you back so soon, Ari. And you brought a friend! That's exciting!"

Exciting?

Oh fuck.

I can see why Ari wanted me to meet him. Nothing about this male screams danger. Crallek was never like this. Never exuberant, and certainly never friendly. He could be an asshole on occasion. And later, he became a violent, murderous asshole.

This boy lacks his father's hard edges. And he's not a boy. He's a male in his prime—and he's grinning at Ari with a mixture of expectation and unmistakable appreciation.

A sense of unreality descends over me. For a moment, I just…stare at him, taking in his tentacles and his thick, round pecs. He's even bigger up close. His abs are well-defined, his tatted arms packed with muscle.

And I have no business thinking about any of this.

Ursan cocks his head to the side, dark chocolate waves flowing softly around his ears. His smile grows bigger as he looks at me. "Are you here for a tour as well?" He winks at me.

I suck in a breath. He fucking *winked* at me. Yeah, I think, glowering. I *am* here for a godsdamned tour. A tour of your power so I can decide whether or not to kill you like I killed your father.

Oblivious to the whiplash of my thoughts, he turns his smile on Ari. "I'm glad you're back." He lifts a tentacle. In it, he clutches a carafe with

an elegant design blown into the glass. "What do you call this?"

Ari smiles. "Humans use it to pour water at fancy dinners."

The boy—no, the man, because that's what he is—smiles good-naturedly. "Well that's hardly useful to me down here."

"No," Ari agrees. "Could be useful for storing your forks, though."

I looked between them, my sense of unreality growing. Just what in the fuck is happening right now? Storing forks? Ari was with Ursan for two hours, and now they're discussing kitchen storage?

As they continue their banter, I take a closer look at Ari. I'm so accustomed to seeing him tense or scowling, it takes me a minute to recognize the expression on his face. He's amused, yes, but there's something more…

Oh gods. He's attracted to Ursan.

Fuck.

I look back at Crallek's son with a scowl.

He offers me a wide smile. "I'm Ursan. It was lovely of Ari to bring you. It's so exciting meeting new people."

I fold my arms. "Triton. Lord of the Sea Syndicate."

He waits. When I don't return his expression, a blush stains his cheeks. His smile falters. "I'm sorry, Triton. I don't know what a syndicate is. Ari might have told you I don't get out much." He looks at Ari with a worried expression.

The guilt I felt as I approached his cave surges back. I shouldn't have come. I shouldn't have scowled at him. I should have done a lot of things differently. Instead, I locked this male away for over two decades, and now he gets excited when he digs up human dinnerware from the ocean floor.

Ursan swallows hard. "Please forgive my lack of knowledge. I'd love to hear more about this syndicate. Maybe you could"—he darts another look at Ari—"tell me about it while I give you a tour of my ship? Or perhaps the garden?"

Panic joins the guilt in my chest, the pressure threatening to choke me. I don't want a tour of his garden. I want him to be dangerous and evil so I can justify killing him.

But he's neither of those things. And I don't think I can murder this male. Because that's what it would be. Cold-blooded killing. I can't ask Ari to do it, either. He was raised on precisely that sort of savagery. Killing for pleasure. Killing for survival. Killing for the hell of it. It took a toll.

Always, these things take a toll.

“Triton?” Ursan's expression is concerned now. His voice dips low and rolls with something that lifts the hair on my nape. “Are you sure you don't want a tour?”

Gods, his power. Does he even know he’s using it? The shell at my neck burns red-hot, threatening to brand me. It’s as if Crallek’s power is calling to his son’s. I’ve got to get out of here. I shouldn’t have worn the shell. That was a mistake.

“Another time,” I say brusquely. I turn to Ari. “Let’s go.”

Ursan frowns. “Did I say something wrong? I’m sorry.” His chest expands. "I just…please don’t leave. I’d love to have two new friends.”

Ari stiffens, caught between my demand and the sea witch’s plea.

I look toward the shipwreck and the cave behind it. With one glance, I take in Ursan's entire world. This is all he knows—piles of junk, a school of sea nymphs, and a kelp garden.

I turn and speed back to the reef, misery brewing in my gut.

Ursan is nothing like I thought he’d be. Like Ari said, he seems kind and curious. What’s even worse is that he’s clearly lonely too.

And it’s all my fault.

Chapter 6

Ari

Triton’s powerful fins cut the water as he leaves without a backward glance. He didn't even bother responding to Ursan.

When I turn to the sea witch, he’s rubbing one elbow with his big hand. I can’t help but notice how long and thick his fingers are, how utterly masculine he is. Veins run across the back of his wrist, highlighting its strength. More than ever, I'm reminded this male is *not* a boy. Not a kid. Everything about him screams power, even though he doesn’t seem to know the first thing about it.

“I offended him,” he says softly. “Your friend." Chocolate-brown eyes meet mine. "I’m sorry.”

“I’ll talk to him.” Although, I have an idea why Triton left like that. My king is skilled at hiding his emotions, but he can't hide from me. I know him too well.

Ursan still looks crestfallen, so I lay a hand on his shoulder and give the muscle an awkward squeeze. “I'll bring Triton back for a visit soon.” I don’t know why I’m trying to soothe the witch. I just know he looks like someone kicked his seahorse and I hate it.

Ursan looks at my hand on his shoulder. Something shifts in his eyes, his despondent expression melting into interest that sends all kinds of warnings blaring through my brain. He drifts closer, and one of his tentacles snakes across the tip of my tailfin, sending pleasure streaking up my spine. In my pouch, my stupid cock hardens, threatening to push from my slit.

I don’t move. My heart speeds up, and I take shallow breaths as I try to figure out just what the fuck is happening. I mean, I know what's happening with *me*. This is hardly the first time I've been lured by a pair of broad shoulders. Triton and I have always had an open relationship. We're on the same page about it, and it works for us.

But the sea witch is most definitely *off* that page. The table. The menu. Any number of things. Because I absolutely cannot entertain this complication.

Even as I think it, I let my eyes wander to his chest. His nipples pebble and tighten under my gaze, and I bite back a groan. The flat peaks are darker than Triton's. Darker than mine.

I've got to get out of here. The last thing I need to do is fuck Ursan, despite the obvious signals he's sending me.

Does he know he's sending them?

His eyes darken, and his voice goes low. "You don't have to bring him if he doesn't want to come." He drifts closer, one of his tentacles brushing my tail. He's taller than I am. Bigger. A lot bigger.

Fuck.

Another brush of his tentacle along my tailfin. "But…you'll come back, won't you,

Ari?"

This is dangerous, so fucking dangerous, because we're dancing around an obvious attraction. I should stop this. Shut it down before it can start.

But I'm an asshole, so I keep it going. "You'd rather I come alone, Ursan? Why is that?" There's a teasing lilt to my voice that I haven't used in years. It comes back far too easily.

"I have questions about some things," he says, his eyes running down my chest. Lingering at my waist and sending more blood pumping to my dick. "Things I've been wondering about for a while." He drags his dark eyes back up. "I feel like I can ask you."

Fucking hells. Of course he's curious. He lives alone, and he's a healthy, twenty-six-year-old male. In his position, I would have painted the walls of my cave with cum and desperation. It's fucking depressing. Worse, I'm responsible for his desperation.

And I don't want to examine why I'm just as curious as he is. Right on cue, my mind fills with visions of us tangled together. I wonder how his tentacles would feel wrapped around my—

I suck in a breath as one of those tentacles whips around my waist and hauls me into Ursan's chest.

"F-Fuck," I stutter. A split second later, I frown. Because I just fucking *stuttered*.

"Stay," he demands, his voice going low and resonant. He rests one of his big hands on my lower stomach, right where my skin transitions to scales. Long fingers stroke slowly up the vee of my abs to one of the sharp

spines at my waist. Heady lust shoots through me like a spear. Does he understand how pleasurable that kind of touch is for one of my kind?

His eyes glow a faint green with latent power.

Just like his father's did.

I should go. He's using his power but seems unaware of it. His dark eyes gleam with heat and curiosity and dominance. The last makes my throat go dry. Gods help me, this seemingly innocent male has an alpha streak a mile wide. My dick throbs, ready to spill from my pouch. This is a disaster.

"*No*, Ursan," I growl, shoving him away with more force than I intend.

His tentacles release instantly. He retreats in a swirl of bubbles, his eyes wide and startled. He ducks his head, and faint color stains his cheekbones. "I'm sorry," he says, his gaze firmly on the sea bed. Dark brows pull together. "I didn't mean to press you. I just…" He swallows, his thick throat bobbing. "I'll see you around, I guess." Without looking at me, he turns and quickly makes his way to his cave. The muscles in his back pull and flex under miles of tan skin as he digs his tentacle into the sand, moving a lot faster than someone his size should be able to move. He's elegant even in flight. And then he's gone, hidden in his cave of surface junk.

I hover at the edge of his reef, my mind spinning with the implications of the past ten minutes. Ursan has surprised me from the start, but I didn't expect *this*.

Turning, I pump my fins and round the bright, healthy reef that marks the edge of his territory. Triton is a glittering flash of blue in the distance, his pace slow as he swims toward home. He's waiting for me, salt-and-pepper hair waving in the current.

He turns and pauses when he hears me approach, an inscrutable expression on his face,

But then it cracks, and I watch emotions play over his face. Anger. Surprise. Confusion. A flash of weariness. His hand strays toward the shell pendant buried among his necklaces, and his shoulders sag. The power weighs him down. And now we have another weight to bear.

Guilt.

I swim into Triton's arms, swiping at his lips with my tongue. He parts for me, palming my nape and deepening our kiss. And that kiss says everything we can't say out loud.

We can't kill him. He's not like his father. He's innocent.

Although maybe not so innocent. Ursan was seconds away from wrapping me up in his tentacles and pinning me to the ocean floor. And, fuck me, I'm not sure I would have resisted.

Triton pulls back, his blue eyes spearing me with their intensity. "He's not what I expected. I need to know more before I decide what to do."

I nod. "I'm glad you agreed to meet him."

He frowns, seemingly lost in thought, his hand still gripping the back of my neck like I'm his lifebuoy. Finally, he sighs. "We need to push him a little, to understand what his power is like when he's not in his element."

"Yeah," I rasp. Although, Ursan seemed completely in his element when he wrapped his tentacle around my waist.

"Take him to the surface," Triton says. "There are plenty of places above where you can assess him away from our syndicate. If he loses control, I'd rather it not happen down here. We can't risk the leviathans escaping."

"I'll come back tomorrow and take him to the Hallows." I'm a little ashamed of the excitement that rises in my chest at the assignment. It's ten kinds of fucked up to lust after my dead friend's son, but I can't deny the lust that still simmers under my skin.

Triton clears his throat, and I realize I'm daydreaming about taking Ursan above with Triton's kiss lingering on my lips. Shrugging off errant thoughts, I stroke both hands down Triton's chest, feeling his tight nipples and the hard swells of his pecs. He plays with the mating pearl on a string around his neck, but like always, tucks it back under the mound of necklaces. I resist the urge to touch mine.

We don't speak on our way back out into the open sea. But somehow, I feel both lighter and heavier, like we've turned the corner on one problem only to stumble into another. Ursan doesn't *feel* like a threat, but feelings aren't good enough in the Sea Syndicate. Triton and I need certainty. But the only thing I know for certain right now is that I have no fucking clue what I'm doing with the sea witch. For the first time in years, I feel completely out of my depth.

The following night, Triton and Bastian argue while I pick at dinner. I'm taking Ursan to the surface in an hour and I'm anxious to be on my way. Visions of his tats and tentacles have dominated my thoughts since last night. I also haven't stopped thinking about the way he looked when I told him *no*.

"It will end in disaster," Bastian growls, snapping his big claws in irritation. The clicking sound makes me clench my jaw.

He turns to me with a pleading look. "Please help me convince his majesty that the child must die. There's never been a sea witch in recorded history who didn't turn bad. We cannot risk—"

"I'm taking him to the Hallows," I say. Fucker. Somehow, I'm offended that he wants to kill Ursan without even meeting him. Never mind that I wanted to do the same thing yesterday.

Bastian makes an irritated sound and pinches the bridge of his nose with his claw. "Why have an advisor if you don't listen to him?" he says under his breath.

"Hard not to listen when he won't shut up," I mutter.

Bastian lowers his claw and stares at me across the table.

I shove another bite of food in my mouth. He and I don't have the relationship he has with Triton. Bastian keeps his mouth shut about my past, but it's no secret he thinks I might steal the silverware when no one's watching. No surprise, we often struggle to see eye to eye. The situation is exacerbated by the sheer number of times he's mentioned murdering Ursan tonight.

I *will* kill the sea witch if I determine him to be a threat. But it sours my gut more than anything I've had to do for my clan or the syndicate. I'm no less torn about it today than I was yesterday.

Triton catches my eye from the head of the table. "Go, Ari. Report back when you feel confident in your assessment. Do what you must, Second."

He holds my gaze for a long, tense beat, his blue eyes shining with meaning.

Do what you must. His choice of words is deliberate. And Triton is no fool. He definitely noticed my reaction to Ursan yesterday. He's giving me free rein to push the witch in whatever way I need to figure out if he's dangerous or not. My cock plumps in my pouch just thinking about how that might play out. I'm not Triton's lover tonight. I'm his second. He was deliberate in calling me that too. It's his way of giving me express

permission to fuck Ursan if I need to. Whatever it takes to uncover the reality we're facing.

Nodding, I push away from the table. Ignoring Bastian's disapproval, I go to Triton and hover at his side. As he looks up at me, the shell pendant around his neck glows softly in the dining room's low light. His big hands rest easily on the arms of his chair as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

If only that were true.

My king's shoulders are broad, but no one can carry the weight of the sea without suffering. As always, I wish I could help him more. I wish we could go back in time, to when we were younger and he wasn't responsible for every damn creature in the ocean. But I can't. All I can do is serve him as I do now.

I bend and drop a kiss on his shoulder. "I'll come to you when I return." I sluice to the door, feeling his eyes on my back as I go. And I don't mind the weight of his regard. It's a brand between my shoulder blades—a reminder that I'm his no matter what I have to do to keep the peace.

Bastian resumes his bitching, but the sound fades as I leave the busy castle. I fly across the open sea between our clan's territory and Ursan's cave, hopping from current to current. I keep my eyes open for sharkmen and giant squid, both of which have caused trouble recently. Uprisings are a daily event in the Sea Syndicate. The other syndicates aren't glowing utopias, but their problems are kindergarten-level compared to the shit that goes down under the waves.

Lucky assholes.

At last, Ursan's reef comes into view. I slip over the bright coral and look around the garden, but he's nowhere in sight, so I glide to the shipwreck and poke my head in.

He sits on the floor with his back against the mirror he showed me yesterday. His eyes are closed, his expression melancholy.

Guilt swells. Gods, has he been sitting here all night?

"Hey," I say gruffly.

Chocolate-brown eyes open. If he's surprised to see me, he doesn't show it. For the first time, he looks guarded. Cautious. He doesn't move from his spot, just cocks his head to one side as his eyes glow faintly green.

Unlike Crallek, his power doesn't stab at the edges of my mind, trying to find a way in. No, Ursan simply looks at me and waits.

I clear my throat. “I have a surprise for you. Something that’ll make all your trinkets make sense.”

Interest flickers in his eyes. Four of his tentacles reach along the floor and pull his muscular frame gracefully upright. They crawl their way across the ship's deck to me. I hover in the doorway as he comes close. But not too close. Unlike yesterday, he's careful to maintain a safe distance between us.

Fuck me, I want to grab one of his big hands and put it back on my body. I want to answer the questions he alluded to yesterday. And yeah, if I'm honest with myself, I want to do more than provide answers. I'd like to teach him. There's no question he'd be an eager pupil.

“I didn’t think you’d come back,” he says quietly. He folds his arms, all brawn and tattoos. Maybe it's my imagination, but he looks even bigger today. It's another reminder that he's not a boy. He's an adult male—a gifted sea witch coming into his power.

I open my mouth to speak, but a rustling noise stops me. The sea nymphs hover just outside one of the wreck’s portholes. They flutter in the current, watching us.

I give them a look. “I’m taking Ursan somewhere tonight. He’ll tell you all about it when he returns.” I give them another look—hopefully one that says *I’m not going to kill him right now*. For some reason, I want to put the little creatures' minds at ease. I don't owe them an explanation. Like everyone else in the sea, their loyalty is to Triton, not Ursan. But their devotion is endearing.

Ursan swallows, and an odd expression glints in his eyes. "I'd love to go, Ari, but I can't."

Surprise—and the unfamiliar sensation of being turned down—makes me blurt, "Why the fuck not?"

He gnaws his lower lip, and I try to ignore how full and inviting it is. Eventually, he sighs. “This is embarrassing, but I can’t leave the reef. It makes me violently sick to cross it.” Dark eyes flash up to mine, his cheeks ruddy with embarrassment. “I’ve tried, but I just can’t.”

More guilt. Fuck. I could tell him why he gets sick when he tries to wander past the reef. I set the siren spell that keeps him here, and I can also release it.

But I need him to *want* to go. I need to understand if he thirsts for adventure, or if he's content with the simple life he's led so far. Is he curious enough about the outside world to risk illness and discomfort? Just how far

is he willing to go to break free? These are all things Triton will want to know.

Reaching out, I grip one of Ursan's tentacles. I move my hand down the length of it, smiling a little at the way the suckers underneath run through my hand, sticking for just a moment before popping off.

Ursan gasps, his cheeks going bright red. He balls his fists and draws a shuddering breath. “That’s…” He clears his throat.

Ah. So he likes this. Well, that's a good reason to do it again. I wrap the end of his tentacle twice around my fist and squeeze. The blush on his cheeks spreads down his neck and chest.

I lock eyes with him. “You had questions yesterday. I’m going to answer them.”

His chest rises and falls. Dark eyes glitter, and he drags in another breath. "I'll feel sick—”

“You won't. I have magic that'll help.” I tilt my head. “Aren't you curious about the surface?”

A single dip of his head. “Yeah.”

I drag him closer with the thick tentacle in my hand. His lips part, dark eyes brimming with curiosity once more. One of his other tentacles snakes across the floor and rubs gently along my tailfin. I suppress a shudder as pleasure sizzles up my spine. I could pretend I didn't spend part of last night fantasizing about being wrapped in all eight of his powerful arms.

But I'd be a fucking liar.

“Do all of the Folk have this magic?”

It takes me a second to realize he's referencing my ability to help him leave without feeling sick.

“Some,” I hedge, shrugging as I tug his tentacle a little harder. I drift into him, moving close enough for our chests to brush together. My nipples harden as they make contact with his. A muscle leaps in his jaw, his dark eyes glowing again as he searches my face.

“You told me no yesterday, Ari.” His voice has gone deep and commanding, and I'm in so much fucking trouble because my knees want to loosen. To bend under the weight of those brown eyes.

“Today I’m a yes,” I say simply.

Ursan tries to look stern, but the corners of his lips lift into a soft smile. Then it broadens, revealing bright, white teeth.

“Come on,” I command, dragging him by the tentacle out of the ship and past his garden. I swim fast, sluicing through the water before he can change his mind.

But he freezes when we reach the edge of the reef. He pales and looks at his garden over his shoulder.

The sea nymphs swim around us, waving as a group. Dash gives Ursan an encouraging look.

“Have fun, Ursan. We can’t wait to hear about it when you get home!”

A chorus of yeses rises from the school of nymphs. Little tails wag, and big eyes crinkle at the corners. Their excitement is undeniably cute, but it's also a wake-up call. Triton and I ignored Ursan at our peril. While we were busy pretending he didn't exist, the nymphs were falling in love with him. Their friendship has been building for two decades. Triton and I should have checked on Ursan far sooner.

I grip a starfish pendant on a chain around my neck and whisper an incantation. A subtle shockwave ripples through the water. When it dissipates, I turn to Ursan. “Ready?”

He's still pale, but he nods and crawls up the reef, his tentacles gripping and pulling. When he reaches the top, he gives an elated whoop and stares down at me with stars in his eyes. “I don’t feel sick! You freed me, Ari!”

I don’t think he could have said anything worse to me. It’s my fault he’s been imprisoned for twenty years. Triton and I are a pair of fucking assholes. And Ursan's joy is a stark reminder of why I'm taking him to the surface in the first place. I'm not here to show him anything. I'm here to find out if he needs to die.

Shoving that thought aside, I climb the reef. When I stand beside him, I jerk my head toward the sea. “Just do what I do.” I leap off the reef and grab the closest current. Instantly, I'm thirty yards from Ursan, the water pushing at me to keep going.

Ursan's face is a mask of shock as he balances on the edge of the reef. Then a look of determination descends over his features, and he grits his teeth and jumps. His tentacles wind tightly together. He hits the current and zips to my side, fresh joy springing into into his eyes.

“Gods, that was amazing! Is the whole sea like this?”

“The sea is fucking dangerous,” I warn. “Stick close to me.”

A mischievous smile touches his mouth, that damn dimple appearing. “No problem, Ari. You wanna hold my hand?”

Fuck me, I do. But I need to maintain some sort of distance until I figure out what to do with him.

“Try to keep up,” I say, then I pump my tail twice and dart forward.

Ursan speeds after me. For an hour, we dip and dive through the currents. He stays quiet, but he never stops smiling.

Eventually, we reach the edge of what used to be New York Bay. As the water grows shallow, Ursan pulls close to me. “Where are we going?”

“The Hallows, the world above the sea. I’m going to show you where your trinkets come from.” I surface, then flip to my back on the beach and sit up. He mimics me, and I bump his shoulder with mine. “Shift. Just think about it, and it'll happen. I suspect you'll have a few of those questions you wanted to ask me yesterday.”

His cheeks flush red again. “I was too forward. I shouldn’t have pressed you. We’re friends, and that’s fine.”

I smile and let the shift roll through me. My tail morphs into a set of powerful human legs. They’re long and corded with muscle. Between them, my cock hangs thick and heavy against my thigh. It bounces as I rise to my knees and face Ursan.

His lips are parted, his dark eyes locked on my dick. He sits in the shallow water, his fingers buried in the sand but all eight tentacles still in the sea.

“Come on,” I coax. “There’s no one around.” It's early evening, and the sun is sliding toward the horizon. The beach is quiet, the only sound the soft lap of the waves against the sand.

Ursan hauls his body fully onto the sand. The moment the water flows away from him, his tentacles begin to shorten and shift. He gasps as the purple shade fades to the same tan as his skin. In a rush of movement, his eight legs become two. He’s all long sinew, every muscle visible. Elegant feet wiggle, and he gapes at his ten toes.

“Oh my gods,” he murmurs. “How is this possible? Can all sea beings do this?”

“No.” I squat beside him. “Mermen, sirens, sea witches. Nobody else *wants* to come on land.”

I anticipate a shitload of follow-up questions, but he’s too busy admiring his legs. He shifts them from side to side, then reaches down and

touches his toes. He huffs a quiet laugh, his gaze fascinated.

I rise and tap his shoulder. “Let’s get going. We need to grab clothes.”

His gaze lands on my dick—then immediately drops to *his* dick.

Yeah, he's as big there as he is everywhere else. And there goes my attempt at ignoring it.

He gulps and touches it. His flesh jumps under his fingertips, and he sucks in a breath.

Then he wraps his whole fucking hand around his length.

A groan builds in my chest. His cock is beautiful. Long, thick, and traced with big, round veins. The balls underneath are full and round, the crinkled skin the same dusky shade as his nipples.

He reaches his free hand down and cups his sack. “What is this for?”

Gods. My face heats. I'm *blushing*. This is ridiculous.

Swallowing another groan, I grab my own junk. “*These* are balls. We don’t have them when we’re under the sea. In this form, there’s no channel. Just the balls and the dick. The, um, asshole is the same.” And I should probably just dive back into the ocean right now.

Ursan gives his cock a tentative stroke.

“No,” I say sharply, and he jerks his hand away like he's been burned. Fuck, I've scared him. I shove a hand through my drying hair. “It's okay to touch, just…not right now.” I gesture toward the grass that marks the end of the beach and the start of the Hallows. “We should get going.”

Ursan flips to all fours. I avert my gaze, but not before a get an eyeful of thick,

round cheeks and a deep, tantalizing cleft.

He pulls one leg up and plants a flat foot on the ground. Slowly, he does the same with his other foot so he's crouching. Then, arms splayed, he stands. He’s wobbly, and it’s fucking adorable. He tips precariously but rights himself, a smile pulling at his lips.

“I think I got it, Ari!” He takes a step forward and pitches violently, crashing into me and knocking us both to the sand.

And suddenly, I'm flat on my back with seven feet of sea witch straddling my hips. His dick presses hard against mine.

He blinks down at me. “Ari,” he breathes.

I whip a hand up and grip his throat. “There’s a lot I want to show you tonight, Ursan. Shall we begin?”

His eyes darken with lust. “Yes,” he rasps. “I’m ready for whatever you want to show me, Ari. Lead the way.”

Chapter 7

Ursan

Ari leads me to a small wooden shack I didn't notice at first.

Then again, I've been more than a little distracted by his body. I thought he was beautiful before, but seeing him on land makes my stomach flip over and my skin feel hot and cold at the same time. His pale skin shimmers in the setting sun, all that hard muscle rippling as he strides across the sand.

Speaking of the sun, it's completely different up here than it is under the sea. Its light is *everywhere*, and it burns my skin. I turn and stare at the shimmering orange ball that appears to sink into the ocean.

Pain stabs my eyes, and I cry out and jerk my head away. The world goes blurry. I'm still unsteady on my feet, and I stumble.

A firm hand clamps around my bicep, and then Ari's deep voice rumbles in my ear. "Easy there, Ursan." He sounds impatient, but not angry. "You're not supposed to stare directly into the sun."

"I'm sorry," I gasp, blinking as my vision returns to normal. Bright green eyes under arched red brows meet mine, and now Ari looks almost… sad. Or maybe that's regret I see.

My gut tightens with panic. If I'm too much of a bother, he'll take me back below. "I won't look at it again," I say quickly. He has no reason to show me the surface. We've only known each other a day. He's just being nice to me. "I'm sorry," I say again.

"Stop apologizing," he snaps, and now he *does* seem angry.

"I'm sor—" I clamp my mouth shut and wait for him to announce he's had enough and we're returning to the ocean.

All at once, the anger drains from his face. He moves his hand from my bicep to my shoulder. "Stop apologizing, okay? Just…don't look at the sun." He waves a hand in front of his face. "Eyes on me, all right?"

I gulp. "All right."

He opens the shack's door. As I follow him inside, I let my gaze travel down his muscular back—and the tantalizing curves beneath it. It's not

going to be a hardship keeping my eyes on him. I want to touch everything I see, from those firm, round globes to the deep cleft between them.

He bends and rummages through a chest, and my mouth waters as his cleft parts, revealing the *hole* he spoke of. Beneath it, his heavy balls sway with his movements. Blood pounds in my dick, which thrusts out from my hips like a piece of driftwood.

Ari straightens and turns, clothing in his hand. His green eyes dip to my dick.

I put a hand over it.

His eyes travel back up, and now they're heated, the frost from a moment ago completely thawed. "See something you like?"

"Yes," I say, my voice sounding gruff in my ears. His hair is drying, and now the longer waves on top are pushed back from his forehead. The shaved sides show a little of his scalp underneath. My fingers twitch, longing to find out if the waves are as soft as they look. If the shaved parts would scratch my skin.

He steps forward, and now our chests are almost touching. Gently, he takes my wrist and moves my hand away from my groin. "Don't hide. What you feel is natural, especially for our kind."

Hope swells in my chest. "It is?"

His scarred lips curve. "Yeah. Merfolk and sea witches are lusty creatures. And as I told you before, we usually stick with our own sex."

"Playing for the same team?" He still holds my wrist. I wish he'd hold my dick. My breath hitches. "As in, males liking males?"

The corners of his eyes crinkle. He releases my wrist and skims his long, elegant fingers across my abdomen, making me shiver. "Yeah. Males liking males."

My dick twitches, bobbing toward him like an eager sea puppy. The head throbs, and cool air touches the tip, which is leaking moisture. I've touched myself a few times. Okay, plenty of times. When the sea nymphs are gone, I venture deep into my cave and tease my dick from its pouch. If I rub it fast enough, bliss explodes, more of that moisture spurting into the sea. It's the best feeling.

But I can't help thinking it would feel better if Ari rubbed me that way. If he stepped into me and rubbed his dick against mine. Like the rest of him, his is pale and hard, the shaft curved upward. It looks like it would fit perfectly in my palm.

I lean forward, my heart speeding up and my mouth watering with the need to press my lips to his. To sink my teeth into that scar that keeps drawing my gaze.

Suddenly, clothing presses against my chest. Ari steps back, his arm outstretched between us, clothes dangling from his fist against my pecs. “Put these on. We can’t linger here. We’re technically on Sky Syndicate land, and I don’t feel like being questioned by a bunch of grotesques.”

Protests crowd my throat, but I swallow them as I take the clothes. “What are grotesques?”

He grunts. “Short, angry little fucks who are a lot tougher than they look.” He nods toward the clothing. “Start with the pants.”

The clothes are a mystery, and I fumble with them until he sighs and pulls them from my hands. He squats with the pants and motions for me to put my leg in one of the holes. When I get to my second leg, I lose my balance and have to grab his head to stay upright. I muss his red waves, and he gives me a look as he straightens and goes for the shirt.

“Sorry,” I mumble, my dick tightening all over again.

He tosses his hair from his eyes. “What did we say about apologizing?” He bunches the shirt in his big hands and jerks his head. “Arms up.”

I lift my arms obediently, and he tugs the shirt over my head. “Stop doing it,” I mutter through the fabric.

“Right.” He pulls everything into place, then steps back. He rubs a hand over his mouth as he gives me an assessing look. “They’re going to eat you alive in the Aerie.”

My stomach flips, but not in a nice way. “Eat me?”

“Not literally.” He dresses quickly, moving in a graceful way that’s almost like a dance. His shirt molds to his chest, which makes me want to rip it off him again. He reaches inside his neckline and pulls his necklaces from under the fabric. His starfish pendant rests between two plump pecs, and I’ve never been more jealous of a dead echinoderm.

Ari claps a hand on my shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get you something else to look at.”

As I follow him from the shed, it’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I don’t want to look at anything else. But the second we leave the beach, I realize I’m wrong.

“What *is* this place?” I breathe as I stumble behind him, my head turning on a swivel. The sun is gone now, and the world is full of sparkling lights. Soaring buildings rise all around us. The sea brings me images like this sometimes—skylines from the human world etched on broken pottery or pieces of tin. “The sea nymphs said the humans destroyed their cities.”

Ahead, Ari stops and turns. He makes an exasperated sound as he comes to me and takes my hand. “Don’t fall behind. The Hallows isn’t as dangerous as the sea, but you’re a little wet behind the ears, if you get my meaning.”

I don’t, but he’s holding my hand so I shut up and match his pace. And I gawk. There’s no other word for it. I drink everything in, staring at buildings with hundreds of windows that reflect the light. Creatures pass us—bipedals of every size and shape imaginable. Males and females and a few that could be both or neither. We pass Myth beings with fangs and wings and claws. Eyes follow us, heads turning as we move down the pavement.

“They’re looking at us, Ari,” I whisper.

Green eyes slide to me. “They’re looking at you, Ursan.” He gestures to the big glass window on my other side. “I don’t think you realize how hot you are.”

I stare at our reflection, but I don’t see what he sees.

I only see him.

And he’s wrong, because the beings we encounter are definitely interested in him. Eyes travel over his broad shoulders and narrow hips. Gazes linger on his chest and the bulge between his thighs. When a tall male with a set of black horns looks a little too closely, a growl rips from my throat before I can stop it.

“See something you like?” I demand, stepping in front of Ari and using his line from the shack. My voice ripples. Across the street, a glass window shatters.

The horned male takes a swift step backward, his hands lifted. “Sorry, man. I didn’t realize the fish was with you.”

Ari draws a sharp breath behind me.

Anger rises hot and fast. “He’s from the Deep, and he’ll eat your liver for lunch if you call him a fish again.” I take another step forward and bare my teeth. “Leave. *Now*.” My voice echoes, the words overlapping.

The male's face drains of color. He turns and darts away, moving quickly for such a big male.

Awareness creeps in, and I realize I've attracted a crowd. My heart pumps fiercely, blood pounding in my ears. Across the street, onlookers huddle around the broken window. Slowly, I turn around.

Ari stands with folded arms, his expression unreadable. His green eyes go from me to the glass and back again. "Gothel will throw you out of his territory if you break his buildings."

Worry waves through me. Remembering his rule against apologizing, I lick my lips. "I didn't like the way he looked at you."

A red eyebrow goes up.

"I won't do it again."

Ari holds my stare until I drop my eyes. I hear him sigh, and then he slips his hand into mine again. "Come on, troublemaker. We're almost there, so you shouldn't have to defend my honor again."

I don't know what that means, but it feels like the wrong time to ask. So I bottle my curiosity and let him pull me down the street. We walk silently for a moment, and then I see him glance at me from the corner of my eye.

"I'll eat his liver, huh?"

When I look at him, his lips are twitching. If I'm not mistaken, he's trying not to laugh. I clear my throat. "I don't even know if he has a liver. But it sounded good."

Ari laughs—a deep sound that hardens my dick all over again. "It was a good threat." He swings into my path and opens a big door. Loud music spills onto the pavement as he gestures me inside. When I move past him, his warm breath caresses my nape. "And I *love* demon liver."

THE BUILDING WAS incredible from the outside. The inside blows my mind.

"Ari, there is *paper* on the *walls*," I whisper.

His chuckle is as warm as his hand in mine. "Yeah, it's called wallpaper." He doesn't let go as he leads me into a room full of objects more dazzling than anything I've collected over the years.

Music pumps like the beat of a heart. Creatures in beautiful clothes stand around tables where males and females in some kind of uniform hand out tiny squares of white paper. Everyone seems *really* interested in the paper.

"Playing cards," Ari murmurs before I can ask. "It's called blackjack, and you are *not* ready for it." He weaves around a female with a head full of hissing snakes. "But I think we could both use a drink."

The "drink" comes in a big, bowl-shaped glass with a long stem and some kind of powder around the rim. I lick at it and immediately pucker my lips.

"Salt," Ari says, his eyes crinkled with laughter. "Gods, this is way more fun than I thought it would be." He lifts his own drink, which is small and brown. He swallows it in one gulp and signals the male behind the table —a "bar" I know now—for another. Green eyes return to me, and he nods toward my glass. "Try the rest. You'll like it."

I obey, and my eyes go wide above the rim as cool, sweet-and-sour liquid flows down my throat. It's strange but delightful, and I keep going like Ari did, gulping until I have to come up for air. When I set my nearly empty glass down, Ari grins.

"Good boy, but you're not supposed to drink the whole thing in one take. Not unless you want me to carry you home."

I nod, that "good boy" and the image of him carrying me making my stomach flutter like I swallowed a school of minnows. "You drank yours all at once," I point out.

"True, but it's a shot."

"Can I—"

"Not this time. You're a big boy, but you definitely can't handle rum just yet."

I nod, my cheeks heating. My dick strains against my pants as my brain supplies me with images of him feeding his dick into my mouth and calling me "good boy" as he teaches me how to suck it. I don't even know if that's a thing males do, but I'd like to try it with him. Before I can work up the nerve to ask, a deep voice booms over the crowd.

"Good evening, party people!"

I turn, my gaze immediately drawn to a raised platform. As I watch, it rises higher, revealing a tall, slender male. He's dressed in all black except for his white shirt, which looks crisp enough to cut through steel. His body

is gorgeous, but it's his hair that makes him impossible to ignore. Long and pale as moonlight playing along the ocean floor, it falls nearly to his waist. As heads turn toward him, he smiles, revealing a pair of fangs.

"I hope you're all enjoying yourselves," he shouts.

"Not as much as you enjoy Gothel's dick!" someone yells.

The elegant male points into the crowd. "Jealousy will get you nowhere, Cyprio." As the crowd titters, the male flicks his hair over his shoulder. "We really need to stop letting dragons in here."

"I second that," Ari murmurs beside me.

I lower my voice. "Who is that male on the platform?"

Ari slants me a look. Green eyes dip to my groin. "You interested?"

"No."

"Hmm." He turns his gaze back to the platform and lifts his drink. "That's Tower du Sang, and it's best to avoid his kisses. The du Sangs steal power." Ari sips, his pink tongue darting out and catching a drop of rum on his lip. "He's also mated to Gothel, Lord of the Sky."

"I'm not interested, Ari," I rasp, my gaze riveted to the spot his tongue touched. "Not in him."

He keeps his eyes on the platform, but he doesn't pull away when I slip my hand into his. We stay that way, our shoulders touching, as Tower du Sang leaves the platform and a lithe female takes his place. She's completely nude, and I inhale a startled breath. My dick doesn't respond, but a glance around reveals that plenty of the other males assembled are enjoying the show.

A second later, the room dims, and a concentrated beam of light focuses on the ceiling. A contraption slowly descends.

"It's a swing," Ari murmurs, "and the light is called a spotlight." He keeps this up, explaining things before I can ask. The platform is called a "stage," and the two nude males who join the female are "acrobats."

The trio performs a mesmerizing routine, one male dangling upside down from the swing while the female and the other male flip and tumble across the stage. Every few tumbling passes, they leap up and catch the dangling male's hands. Their bodies are like poetry, muscles bunching and flowing. My eyes follow the males' dicks, which swing with their movements. I follow everything, entranced by the spectacle, which makes me feel warm all over. But nothing compares to the warmth of Ari's body

next to mine. He's a solid presence at my side, his long fingers around his glass drawing my gaze as he sips his rum and watches the acrobats.

Cool air buffets my other side, and then a low voice says, "Tinkerbell's left titty, where have those naughty mermen been hiding *you*?"

I turn and find a slender male next to me, a pair of iridescent wings fluttering at his back. His blond head comes to just below my shoulder, putting him at eye level with my chest. He stares at it, slowly bringing a hand to his mouth and biting his first knuckle. "I'm a law-abiding citizen, but I would commit crimes for those pecs." He gives an exaggerated shudder and whispers, "*Terrible* crimes."

Ari is instantly alert, his big body vibrating with tension as he leans around me. "Get lost, Lilygully."

The slight male tips his head to the side. "Ari! How delightful to see you again. I'm surprised you remember me. Don't you ocean types have a three-second memory or something?"

Ari's eyes narrow. "Shouldn't you be pollinating a flower?"

"Oh, I *pollinated* a pair of minotaurs last night." He winks at me. "Talk about grabbing the bull by the horns." He lowers his voice and speaks out the side of his mouth. "Just saying, I might only date men with handlebars from now on."

I stare. It's hard not to, because the male is just as riveting as anything else I've seen since I left the sea. He shimmers all over, from his blue-streaked blond head to his black boots that lace up to his knees. The boots are undeniably masculine—and a sharp contrast to his tight leather shorts and sheer black shirt that shows his nipples. *Pierced* nipples, I realize, and jerk my gaze up.

Brilliant blue eyes surrounded by some kind of dark paint smile at me, and he sticks out his hand. "Jasper Lilygully, pixie and all-around bad bitch."

I stare at his hand. Does he expect me to…do something with it?

Ari solves my problem by knocking it away. "Go find someone else to pester. We're not interested in mischief."

Jasper shakes his hand as if Ari broke it, even though Ari's blow was more of a slap than anything. "So testy tonight. I can see why Triton keeps you on a leash."

In an instant, Ari's aura of irritation shifts to something more menacing. He moves around me, crowding the pixie with his chest. His

features are more angular now, and when he speaks, his teeth look sharper. “Say that again.”

If Jasper is intimidated, he hides it well. He stands his ground, his wings flapping lazily behind him. “Although, I suppose the Lord of the Sea keeps all his subjects on a leash, no?” Blue eyes flick to me over Ari’s shoulder. “The sea being such a dangerous place and all.”

Ari takes another step forward, knocking Jasper back.

“Is there a problem here?” a gruff voice demands.

The three of us turn—and immediately angle our heads down. A tiny gray creature scowls up at us, his bulky arms folded over a barrel-shaped chest. His skin is gray, and a tail curves around his hip. He looks like one of the boulders that scatter the seabed around my shipwreck.

Jasper sweeps the creature an elegant bow. “None at all, Raoul. Just old friends reconnecting. I’m going to get a drink.”

The gray-skinned creature grunts. “You do that.”

Jasper turns to me. “Lovely meeting you, Ursan. Keep your eyes open. Ari and Triton have been known to steal hearts.”

He leaves, shimmering wings fluttering behind him.

I watch him go, a frown pulling at my brows. When I look at Ari, his jaw is tight. “I never told him my name.”

Ari’s response is as taut as his jaw. “Pixies have a knack for knowing things. It’s how they stir up trouble.” He grabs my hand and pulls. “Come on. I need some air.”

I quickly forget about Jasper Lilygully as Ari takes me to a space outside the building.

“We’re in the air!” I gasp, staring at the city sprawled on the ground below.

Ari chuckles—and I’m already addicted to that sound. “This is called a *balcony*,” he says, lifting something to his lips. There’s a flash of fire, and then smoke puffs from his mouth.

My eyes go wide. “You eat fire?”

He sucks at a small cylinder-shaped object, then pulls it from between his lips and directs a stream of smoke into the sky. He waggles the cylinder in his fingers. “Not eat. This is a cigar. You smoke it. I bought it from the bartender during the show. Gothel keeps a nice stock on hand.”

I drift toward him. “Could I try it?”

He eyes me like he’s trying to decide. “You probably won’t like it.”

I eye him right back. “I won’t know unless I try it.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “That’s true. Here.” He flips the cigar around, and I go to him. I mimic what he did, closing my lips around the tip.

Green eyes glitter. “Draw the smoke into your mouth slowly. Don’t suck it into your lungs.”

I obey, sucking at the tip that’s damp from his lips. Smoke fills my mouth, but I barely pay attention. I’m wholly focused on the handsome male standing before me, his eyes the color of sea glass as he gazes at my mouth.

He tugs the cigar away gently. Just as gently, he says, “Now round your lips and blow.”

I do that, too, turning my head a little so I don’t send smoke rolling into his face. My insides turn jittery, and I don’t know if it’s the cigar or Ari.

“How do you feel?” he murmurs, his eyes still on my mouth.

“Good.” Swallowing hard, I place my palm on his hip, not quite daring to pull him into me. But I want to. Gods, I want to. “I feel good when I’m with you.”

He closes his eyes for a long moment. When he opens them, they swim with something that looks like pain. “We should go home.”

Disappointment drops into my stomach like a rock. “Why?” Something Jasper said floats through my brain, and I add, “Is it because of Triton?”

Ari’s gaze sharpens. “What about him?”

My cheeks heat. “I just thought…maybe you two are together? Like… males liking males.” And the big, blue-tailed male definitely didn’t like me. It didn’t make sense to me yesterday. I’d only just met Triton. How could he dislike me so much? But if he and Ari are together, maybe Triton doesn’t want Ari to be my friend—or anything more than that.

Ari smiles. “Yeah. Triton and I are together. Males liking males.”

My heart joins the rock in my stomach. I pull my hand away. “Oh.”

“But we have an agreement.”

“An agreement?”

He nods. “We’ve been together a very long time. But we fu— Uh, sleep with other people with permission.”

My lips part as I try to wrap my brain around what he’s saying. “Who gives the permission?”

Ari's eyes crinkle at the corners. "We do." He lifts a thick shoulder. "If Triton gets a wandering eye, I'm alright with it as long as he asks me first. And it works the other way around, too." He looks down at the cigar between his fingers and flicks gray ash off the tip. "Communication is an important part of any relationship. Maybe the most important, actually. But consent is critical, too."

"And that's—?"

"Making sure the other person is okay with you touching them. Or anything you plan on doing to them. You have to give them a chance to say yes or no. And if they say no, you stop."

My heart pounds, the beat so quick and insistent I wonder if he can hear it. "And what if they say yes?"

He takes another pull from the cigar. He speaks on the exhale, his green eyes glittering through the smoke. "Then you give them what they want."

This is my chance. Out here, on the balcony, with the city's lights twinkling. I might never get another moment like this—an opportunity to feel this beautiful male's hands on me. Curiosity and heat roll through me like a cloud of Ari's cigar smoke, pumping into my lungs and pushing from my lips in a throaty, "Please."

He glances at my mouth. "Please, what?"

"I d-don't know." My throat is suddenly dry, and I swallow. "Anything you want."

He takes a step back. Shakes his head as he tosses the cigar down and steps on it. "Not good enough."

Irritation spikes, puncturing the smoke under my skin. "I said anything! How is that not good enough?" I move forward, and for a second, my need flares so hotly, I want to *make* him do what I want. And I feel like I could. If he denies me, I could open my mouth and force him to submit.

Yes. The smoke inside me turns black. I could make Ari do anything.

But…I don't want to.

I stare at him, and he stares back, those green eyes locked with mine. He waits, his fighter's body braced like he expects me to rush him. I don't like it. Ari is my friend. I don't want to fight him.

I want to fuck him. That's what he was about to say when he spoke of him and Triton sleeping with other people. I want to do that with Ari. I want to do everything with him. And he just told me that's a possibility.

The black cloud dissipates, but my heart still pounds. “Did you talk to Triton about me before you brought me to the surface?”

Ari nods—a single, brief dip of his head.

“Did you…get his permission?”

“I did,” he rasps.

A groan builds in my chest. “Would you like to say yes to me, Ari?”

Another nod. Then he steps into me and presses those beautiful, scarred lips to mine.

The groan escapes, flowing into his mouth like a current. He’s so warm, his tongue slippery as he strokes it along mine. His fingers slide into my hair, and he holds my head still as he deepens the kiss. Shock and pleasure frazzle through me, rendering me helpless to do anything but stand still and let him have his way with me.

And I *love* his way. He tastes of power and cool water as he sucks at my tongue, pulling a grunt from me. One of his hands leaves my hair and slides down my body, skimming my ribs before fumbling at my zipper. A second later, my cock springs free, and Ari’s fingers wrap around me.

“Ahh!” I pull back, my chest heaving as I drop my startled gaze to my dick. For the first time ever, *someone else* is touching me.

Ari is touching my dick. I jerk my head up and find him watching me, little fires of lust dancing in his eyes.

“You like that?” he murmurs, slowly stroking his fist up and down my length. His scar is shiny in the moonlight.

I lean forward and seize his lips, running my tongue over the bunched skin. I do all the things I’ve been thinking about, biting and sucking it. Licking it before pulling back and admiring how it glistens from my kiss.

“Take my dick out,” he says gruffly.

I spring into action, my hands shaking as I undo his pants and pull out my prize. He’s hard and ready, his bulbous tip shiny. I want to taste him, but I also don’t want him to stop touching me, so I copy his movements, squeezing his shaft and pumping my fist up and down.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

I stop at once. “Did I hurt you?”

His lips pull in a wry smile. “No, it’s good. Keep doing it.” He strokes me faster like he means to demonstrate. His hand is just like him—quick and experienced, like there’s knowledge at his fingertips. He swipes his

palm over my dripping head and smears moisture up my shaft, getting me slick.

I do the same to him.

"That's it," he rasps. "That's a good boy."

"Yes!" My hips jerk, my balls swaying wildly. "Call me that. Call me good boy."

His nostrils flare. His free hand shoots out and grips the back of my neck. He pulls my forehead to his and strokes me faster. "You like that, huh?" he demands, his voice a growl I can feel in my chest. "You like being a good boy for me?"

"Yeah," I whimper. The pressure in my balls is so painful, I wonder if something is wrong with me. Like I might actually burst open and die right here on the balcony.

But damn, it'll be worth it.

We stand that way, foreheads growing sweaty as we stroke each other's dicks and huff into each other's mouths. His eyes bore into mine, and his mouth hangs open as he tightens his grip.

"Ungh," I grunt, wincing and loving it.

"Take it," he grunts back. He releases my dick for a second, leaving it to bob as he reaches under and grips my balls. He cups my sack in his palm like he's testing its weight. "You've got a big load in here, good boy."

"Yeah," I whisper, my strokes on his dick faltering as I try not to explode.

"I want it." He squeezes none too gently. "Every drop. You understand?"

"Y-Yes. Please touch me."

He returns to my dick, and I cry out, my hips thrusting hard. My pants drop to my ankles, and I probably look ridiculous but I don't care. The only thing I care about is Ari's fist pumping my dick. We're both leaking so much, our hands make wet, fleshy sounds as we stroke and huff and jerk our hips.

"You gonna come for me?" he rasps. "My good boy is going to give up his cum."

"Yes," I groan, shivering and rocking into his hand while I grip him harder. Jerk him faster.

My explosion of bliss comes a split second later, moisture shooting from my dick as my spine bows and I scream hoarsely. For a moment, my

world is bright color and mind-bending pleasure. *Never, never, never*, I think, joy shooting through my chest. Never has it ever felt like this. I've been missing out. I've missed so much, and I'm so grateful to Ari for showing me this.

He thrusts into my hand a final time, and then something warm and wet coats my hand. I jerk him through it, watching his lips twitch and his nostrils flare. His eyes slide shut as he makes a low, whimpery sound that makes me want to, like, swallow him whole or something.

"You're so gorgeous," I whisper.

He lifts his head from mine. His shoulders rise and fall as he catches his breath. Eyes still glittering, he swipes his hand down my dick and licks his fingers. He holds my stare, his pink tongue flashing as he laps up my bliss.

I can't breathe. I can only stare there, mouth hanging open. Dick hanging limply. Heart trying to pound from my chest. At last, I find my voice. "Ari…"

"Yeah?" he asks gruffly, sucking cream off his thumb.

"You…" I swallow. "You like the way my bliss tastes?"

He frowns. Then understanding lights his eyes. *"Cum,"* he corrects. He touches me again, his big hand tugging at my dick and letting it slap wetly against my thigh. He lifts his hand and speaks between licks. "This is cum. And, yeah, I like the way you taste, Ursan."

Tentatively, I reach out and gather cum from his dick, which twitches under my touch. I lick it from my fingers, tasting salt and sea and male. "I like the way you taste, too, Ari." On impulse, I wrap an arm around his shoulders and press my lips to his, mingling our tastes and breath. When I pull back, I rest my forehead on his again. "I like you."

He closes his eyes. He doesn't answer for a long time, and for a second I worry I've done something wrong.

Then he sighs and relaxes against me. "I like you too."

Chapter 8

Triton

I sit on my coral throne, drinking from a pouch of mead as I watch the swirl of bodies in the Great Hall. Dinner finished an hour ago, and my people are enjoying a night of dancing and temptation. I watch, as I often do, simply thankful to see my people happy. The war with the leviathans nearly decimated us, but the ranks are growing again. Not only have children been contracted with the sirens, but we've attracted merfolk from other clans as well.

A swish of bright tails flits past me—two males wrapped in each others' arms, their mouths clashing together as their tails slap against one another's. I know this dance—they might even treat the rest of us to a public show. But more likely than not, they'll take their bedplay off to a private room somewhere in the castle.

There's a soft clacking noise, and Bastian appears to my right, his big arms crossed as he watches the melee. He never joins in, although I suppose being the only half crab-man is one of many reasons why. In all the years I've known him, he's never once expressed sexual interest in…well, anyone in our court. Rumor has it he goes elsewhere for that. That's his business, though. It doesn't affect his job performance, so I don't give it much thought.

"Brek is rallying again, my king," he murmurs under his breath, never taking his dark eyes from the scene in front of us.

Godsdamnit. I drop the mead pouch and angle my body so no one but Bastian can see my face. "How many?"

"Three dozen. And more to come, according to my spies." Bastian looks at me, muddy brown eyes narrowed. "Now would be a good time to take care of him. It's a shame Ari isn't here, though, being otherwise occupied." Bastian's lips purse in displeasure.

He disagrees with how we're approaching the Ursan issue.

I resist the urge to raise my voice. I can't be seen arguing with my primary advisor in front of my clan. It would undermine us both. I may rule

with an iron fist, but I'm known to be fair. And Bastian keeps my secrets. My people aren't aware of the atrocities I've committed to keep them safe. They don't know about the power I wield because of Crallek's death. To them, Crallek is simply a fallen war hero.

"We're not going to speak about Ari," I growl instead, giving him a look that dares him to continue needling me on this topic.

Bastian's expression turns mulish. "I am on your side, my king. I know you know that."

I do, actually. Bastian is an excellent advisor for all that he's a bit of an asshole and far too trigger-happy for my liking. Although, I suppose growing up in the sea beat that tendency into us all.

"You and I will take care of this," I say, patting his shoulder. "It's been a while since you saw action. It'll do you good."

Bastian huffs, but he won't shirk his duty. He's plenty scrappy. All of the Folk are trained in combat. Even so, I've avoided large-scale fighting until we replenish our numbers. Since I became syndicate ruler, I typically fight bigger battles with nothing more than Crallek's voice and Ari at my side.

Bastian nods and turns from me, click-clacking down the steps and crossing the dance floor. My people float around him, drunk on mead and oblivious to his large form as he scuttles across the room and down the hall toward the exit. When he disappears, I catch the eye of my third, Liveil. He's hovering just inside one of the windows, basking in a brisk current as he talks with another male. The moment he sees me looking, he sluices through the water to me, stopping several steps below my throne.

I give him a once over. He's smart and quick, and he's an excellent fighter. I'm half tempted to take him with me, but the idea dissipates as quickly as it forms. No one can know how I use Crallek's voice. If word got out, I'd be an even bigger target than I already am.

"I need to leave the castle for a while. Keep an eye on things for me?" It's not really a request. Liveil has done this for me before.

"We anxiously await your return, my king," he murmurs in a respectful tone, dipping his head as he places one palm over his broad chest. It's a nice chest—one I've enjoyed biting on more than one occasion both with and without Ari.

I dismiss him with a nod and watch him head for the window again. He says a few words to the other male, who swims off and strikes up a new

conversation. Liveil watches the room carefully. He'll do a good job in my absence.

I descend the stairs, but unlike Bastian, I skirt the edges of the room. I don't want my people asking questions because I don't want to feed them lies.

When I reach Bastian, he holds open the castle's large double doors. They gleam with health, the corals bright and the anemone waving on the currents. In front of the castle, the coral reef teems with activity, fish darting in and out of its nooks and crannies. A stingray sweeps past, paying us no mind.

All of this beauty is a somber reminder of why I can't allow Brek and the sharkmen to attack. They don't love a merman being in charge of the Sea Syndicate. *Welcome to the fucking club*. The sharkmen are nearly as selfish as the leviathans. If they ruled, they would serve their own interests, and the syndicate would suffer.

Ari and I chased Brek away from the castle just a few weeks ago, but if Bastian's spies are right—and they always are—the sharkmen are gathering new forces.

Idiots.

"Ready, my king?" Bastian hands me my trident from its spot by the front door. Together, we exit the castle and find a current that speeds us swiftly toward the open sea.

A half-hour later, we lay side by side atop a flat rock overlooking a kelp-filled valley. Long chains of the yellow algae stretch hundreds of feet toward the surface. This is a merfolk kelp forest. My clan's forest. Already, the sharkmen invade my territory.

The kelp sways gently with the current, but now and again the strands part and a massive sharkman swims through. They circle and circle, never stopping. Because they can't. A shudder builds under my skin. Early in my rule as syndicate leader, I tried to befriend Brek and his kind. My offer was rebuffed. The sharkmen aren't restful creatures. They don't long for peace. I'm not sure they long for anything but disruption.

Bastian and I watch in silence for another ten minutes. Soon, it's clear his spies were correct. More sharkmen glide through the kelp forest, their numbers swelling. Their cold eyes are watchful, their bodies tense. They're obviously waiting for something.

I grip the shell around my neck. It’s already glowing, the pendant itself hot against my skin. It’s almost like Crallek’s power knows when I’ll need to use it, and it’s anxious to be free of its prison. Reaching under the shell, I grab the vial of siren blood I purchased from Lucius du Sang. I unstopper it and swig a whole mouthful, ignoring the stern look Bastian gives me. The blood hits me fast, stolen siren power screaming through my veins as I swish my fins and leave the rock.

I skirt down to the seafloor. Bastian follows, a powerful presence at my back. The sharkmen won’t typically attack unless they smell blood. When they do, battle becomes an all-out feeding frenzy. I stick to the lowest part of the valley’s floor, swimming through the kelp as big shadows pass above me. Sharkmen don’t have the best eyesight, but their sense of smell is keen.

Bastian and I approach a clearing in the kelp forest, and I hold back an irritated groan. Brek swims along with two of his brothers who serve as his generals. Mermen and sharkmen are similarly built. The sharkmen's back halves are that of their shark cousins, while their front halves are all humanoid male. Like mermen, they fuck male on male. Despite these common traits, there is very little cross-breeding between our two species.

As I watch Brek swim past with a black coral crown smashed onto his head, I'm reminded why. The sharkmens' mouths are overly large and full of jagged teeth. As they swim, they keep their jaws open, letting water flow into their mouths and out the gills that line their necks. Their heads drift from side to side, their small, black eyes devoid of emotion or warmth. Brek's eyes have always looked dead to me. Or maybe it's just the vacant expression on his stupid face that I hate.

Those eyes flick to me the moment I push from the seabed and into the middle of the clearing, my trident in one hand. Bastian rises and hovers at my side, both foreclaws up and ready to defend me.

Brek spins and quickly dives down to my level. He swims back and forth, never taking his eyes off mine. Bastian keeps a wary eye on Brek’s brothers, and I focus on the would-be king himself.

“Care to tell me what you're doing in my forest, Brek?” I ask. I lean around him, my gaze on his brothers. “You three are a little old for hide-and-seek, but I'm not judging.”

Brek snarls, triple rows of serrated teeth flashing white in the forest's dim light. “It was foolish to come here, Triton,” he growls, a murderous

look in his soulless eyes. “You're outnumbered. Do you have a death wish, *Your Majesty*?” He delivers my title with enough contempt to shrivel the whole forest. He flips once, pumping his powerful tail as he heads in the other direction.

It must be exhausting to never stop and rest. I can almost feel sorry for him. Almost.

I don’t bother answering his question. “The last time we did this”—I gesture at the sharkmen now gliding out of the kelp to surround us—“I told you to fuck off and die. Do you remember that?”

Brek swims right up to my face before veering off at the last moment. “You don’t own the sea, you arrogant bas—” He shuts his mouth when I grip the shell. Black eyes drop to where it glows brightly in my hand.

“What is that?” he demands, spinning away in agitation only to swim right back.

I stare at him and speak the incantation that allows me to harness Crallek’s voice. His power echoes around the forest, thick waves of it rippling through the water. The siren's blood boils in my veins, sending agony streaking through my limbs. More sharkmen gather around us, drawn from the kelp forest to help their king.

Brek's brothers slice toward me through the water. In a flash, Bastian grabs one and snaps the male's arm in two with one mighty foreclaw. Blood forms a bright-red cloud in the water. I stab at the other sharkman with my trident, shoving him away.

The shell burns my palm as Crallek's power builds. I focus on Brek, my voice deep enough to rumble the seabed. “Eviscerate your brother, Brek. Do it now.”

Brek snarls and roars.

Glancing at the sea of sharkmen around us, I use the power on them as well. “Do nothing,” I command. As the power of persuasion hits them, they continue to swim in jerky circles, heads swinging side to side.

I turn back to Brek. “I told you to eviscerate your brother.”

He gnashes his teeth, but his muscular body turns. He heads for his brother held captive in Bastian's enormous foreclaws. The male's eyes widen, and he screams as he struggles in Bastian's grip.

Brek's face is a mask of terror as he advances forward, his body carrying out actions his mind longs to resist.

"No!" his brother begs, his tail thrashing. "Brek, no!"

"Eviscerate him!" I yell, Crallek's power sending shockwaves through the sea.

Brek bears down on his brother, his maw opening as a white film rolls over his eyes. His brother shrieks, but the sound cuts off as Brek's jaws close around the other male's torso. Brek thrashes his head from side to side as blood and offal fill the water. Both males scream, but Brek can't stop—not when I've ordered him to continue.

I meet Bastian's eyes and nod. My third shoves the dying sharkman away. Brek continues to tear into his brother's midsection, ripping great chunks of flesh from the male's ribs. They float off on the current as the sharks around us begin to dart closer. They'll enter a frenzy soon, which is what I want. Focused males are harder to control with Crallek's voice. A wild mass of bloodthirsty sharkmen desperate to gorge themselves? Far easier.

I watch Brek ripping into his brother's limp body. "It didn't have to be this way," I tell him. "I gave you a second chance. You should have taken it."

Brek bites and rips, every vicious twist of his jaws accompanied by hoarse cries of protest.

I cast my gaze over the rest of the circling sharkmen. Blood drifts around the clearing, bits of Brek's brother spinning through the water like gruesome confetti. One sharkman lunges forward, snatches an arm in his jaws, and darts back into the forest.

Brek shrieks in anger.

I address the sharkmen, my voice rippling with Crallek's persuasion. "Attack until no one is left." Siren power screams through my veins as I repeat the phrase, my voice reverberating off the seafloor as the sharkmen begin to turn on themselves. First one, then another, and then a third begin to bite and attack. The sea fills with blood and body parts as I continue repeating my directive.

But this power isn't mine to command, and using it takes a toll. Exhaustion sweeps me, and I sink to the sea floor, focused only on repeating the words as the sharkmen rip each other to shreds and the kelp forest fills with bodies.

"Attack until no one is left," I whisper, my vision blurring. Bastian's shoulder presses against mine. Dimly, I'm aware I'm leaning against him. But I can't sit upright. My muscles won't cooperate.

“Attack until no one is left,” I mutter again, my eyes closing. I think it’s done, but I can’t leave it to chance. If the sharkmen rally a third time, they could kill me and pitch the syndicate into chaos. And that will give the leviathans an opening.

“My king.” Bastian’s voice sounds so far away. Have I drifted on the currents?

“It’s done, my king.” His voice is soft in my ear. When I open my eyes, the seafloor is littered with pieces of sharkmen. Everyone is dead. It takes effort, but I open my fingers and release the shell pendant.

It sinks down and settles among my necklaces, its green glow dimming and then winking out.

I don't want to look at it, so I find Bastian's dark eyes. “It’s done?” I croak.

“It’s done,” he confirms, slipping my arm over his muscular shoulder. He supports me as we swim slowly through the kelp forest and back to the open sea. My lids are so heavy it's a supreme effort to keep them open. I lose the battle as we near the castle, only waking when Bastian deposits me in my bed. He clatters from the room, and I let darkness overtake me.

“Triton!” The next time I open my eyes, Ari stands over me, his auburn brows pulled tightly together.

Great. He's angry with me.

Groaning, I try to sit up. Except dizziness assails me, and I flop back down.

Ari makes a noise like he tsked under his breath. "What are you trying to do?"

"Window," I grunt.

"You want to sit by the window?"

I try to roll again, and he makes another irritated sound as he hauls me up. His big arms encircle me, and he swims us across the inlaid mother-of-pearl floor to the big driftwood bench that sits under my bedroom window. Through it, my clan's sprawling capital city is visible, the reconstructed spires and repaved roads winking under anemone light.

Ari props me against a pillow, then tugs me forward and fumbles at my necklaces. He unclasps the shell pendant, eases me back, and then fastens the necklace around his own neck.

Instantly, I'm lighter. The dragging exhaustion lifts, too, and I open my eyes wide and take in Ari hovering before me, his thick arms folded over his broad chest.

"Tell me everything," he says. "I left you at *dinner*, for gods' sakes." His tone is exasperated, but his expression shows he's worried.

"Did you talk to Bastian?"

"Briefly." His tone is curt. I can only assume that conversation didn't go well.

I sigh. "Brek had his chance. He squandered it."

"Who's left from his clan?"

"No one. They're all dead."

Ari's lips purse. The expression makes his scar pucker, pulling one lip into a slight sneer. "You couldn't wait for me? You had to do this tonight?"

"It was the right time," I counter, my voice raspy from the power I used earlier. "Bastian agreed."

Ari shakes his head, and it's clear he thinks tonight was the *wrong* time to deal with the sharkmen. His tail moves lazily in the water. So fucking beautiful. I've lost count of how many shades of green glimmer among his scales. Hundreds. My hand goes to my mating pearl, but now doesn't feel like the right time to give it to him.

His cough draws my gaze up his powerful body. He looks…different. His shoulders are lower, his jaw relaxed. Despite the lingering worry in his eyes, he looks calm. Less stressed than he was when we parted.

Ah.

"Tell me about your night," I say, shifting so my tail hangs off the edge of the bench. I wrap my fins around the bottom of his and stroke. The effect is immediate. His breath hitches. Green eyes darken with lust.

"Tell me," I command, slapping my tail just a little too hard against his.

His nostrils flare. So does the lust in his eyes. "Ursan was still Ursan in the Hallows. Kind, curious, powerful."

"How did you test him?" I suspect I know, but I want to hear it from Ari's lips. I wrap my fins around his again and stroke.

“I teased him,” he says, his breathing growing labored. There’s a raw hunger in his gaze that’s usually reserved for our bedroom play. Interesting how it’s there despite talk of the sea witch. We’ve always taken other lovers, and it’s worked fine for us because at the end of the day, he’s still mine. Perhaps a reminder is in order.

I curl my tail around his waist and jerk him into me, bringing his chest flush with mine. Our tails press together from hip to fin. “And did he like your teasing?” I ask against his lips.

“Of course he did,” Ari breathes. Arrogance gleams in his green eyes. “I'm an accomplished cocktease.”

I chuckle as I reach down and press two fingers inside his slit. I bypass his hardening cock and stroke his channel. “You’re wet, Ari Razorfin. Seems like you enjoyed tonight’s assignment.”

He grunts, emerald eyes going heavy-lidded as I continue a slow, methodical exploration of his sex. “He’s not his father,” Ari rasps. “I gave him every chance to use his power on me. He thought about it. I could feel it. But in the end, he didn't…” Ari's words become a groan as I tug his cock from his slit and begin to pump it.

“You’ll always be *mine*, though,” I growl against his mouth. “You know that, right? It’s always been us.”

“Always,” he says, throwing his head back. It’s an invitation to bite my way up his neck. I take it, nipping at his pale skin. I give him the sharp edges of my fangs, knowing I'll leave marks the rest of the clan will see tomorrow.

I continue stroking him with one hand as I use the other to thrust deep into his channel. “Did he touch you here?” I demand, fingering his hot, sodden passage. Feeling his muscles squeeze and clamp down. I push most of my hand inside, opening him wide.

“No,” Ari gasps, rutting against me. “Oh *gods*, Triton, don't stop.”

“How about here?” I pump his dick with a punishing grip.

Ari's lips curve. “He did.”

“And?”

“We jerked each other off. He exploded in my hand. It was hot. He’s not what I expected at all.”

“How so?”

“Dominant.”

“Mmm.” I pull my hand from his slit and draw my own cock out. Then I take us both in hand and stroke. He's leaking like a faucet, and I slick his precum up and down our shafts as he rests his forehead on my shoulder.

“You want him,” I say.

He nods and presses his face into my neck. “I feel hopeful around him,” Ari murmurs.

I slow my strokes as I absorb this, turning it over and over in my mind.

Ari must sense my surprise because he lifts his head. His gaze is serious as he says, "I feel hopeful for the first time in a long time, Triton. Ursan is nothing like Crallek.”

It takes a second before I can form a response. “Do you mean…?” I still my hand on his dick. “You see a future with him by our side?”

“I see him as an ally. I like him.” Ari licks his lips and pushes his hips forward, thrusting into my grip. “I didn't tell you to stop.”

I give his cock a brutal tug that makes him suck in a breath. “You don't tell me anything,” I growl, nipping hard at his bottom lip. Possessiveness flares in my chest, and I channel it into my voice as I rasp against his mouth. “You listen and do as you're told. Isn't that right?”

“Yeah,” he whispers, eyes glittering. He whimpers as I give him another sharp tug. His tongue darts out, swiping the blood I drew. He lowers his gaze. “Yes, my king.”

His submission satisfies the proprietary beast inside me.

But only for a moment.

“You like him, huh?” I growl, stroking his cock. “But you’re mine.” I grip his throat and use my thumb to force his chin up. “Say it.”

“I'm yours.” He reaches down and pulls his cock up to his stomach, exposing his glistening channel. “Always yours.”

The last of my exhaustion dissipates. With another growl, I guide my cock through the slit in his scales and punch deep into the hot, wet channel under his dick. He holds his thick length up, making his passage even tighter. I rock my hips against his as moisture drips from his folds, coating my length. He wraps his arms around my neck and shudders against my lips. I grip the scales that cover his firm, round ass and pound into him. I punctuate every savage thrust with a vow.

“You”—*thrust*—“are”—*thrust*—“mine.”

Too quickly, his channel spasms, soaking me with release. A second later, his dick spurts over my abs and chest. The sticky heat combined with

the tight grip of his channel around my dick tips me right over the edge. I come on a roar, sinking my teeth into his muscular shoulder as I pump his channel full of seed.

When ecstasy fades, I release my bite and grip his chin, forcing his gaze to mine. “I love you. Always and forever, Ari.”

“I love you, too.” He presses his lips to mine. Our kiss is thorough and reverent. A reaffirmation of our commitment to each other. We break it off gradually, neither of us eager to end it.

When I slip my softened cock from his channel, he slumps on the bench next to me. For a moment, he stares out the window, his green gaze distant. Then he looks at me with serious eyes. “Bastian doesn’t agree with how we’re dealing with Ursan. I think it’s going to be a problem.”

A sigh swells my chest as duty rushes back. For a moment, I could almost suggest we jump out the window and swim for the open sea. But I tamp down my wild thoughts and force myself to consider Ari's statement. Would Bastian go behind our backs if he thought it was for the good of the syndicate? I believe he might. Bastian is fiercely loyal, but his foremost loyalty is to the sea. And he's adamantly opposed to keeping Ursan alive. For the first time since I agreed to run the syndicate, I'm not sure I can trust Bastian to comply with my orders—at least not where the sea witch is concerned.

And I have another problem. After tonight, it’s more clear to me than ever that Ari and I can’t continue bearing the burden of Crallek’s voice. I’ve never passed out after using it, and I’m running out of siren blood.

None of these problems are going anywhere. Ursan is the most pressing one. His power will only continue to grow. And as much as I trust Ari, I need to observe Ursan for myself. Before I act, I have to *know* my actions—whatever they might end up being—are justified.

“Let’s take him to our island,” I say suddenly.

Ari sits up. “*Our* island?” Early in my reign as syndicate leader, I built us a getaway spot. Its location is a secret, which is by design. Bastian knows Ari and I go *somewhere*, but we’ve never shared the coordinates with him.

I nod, warming up to my plan. “We'll spend time with him together, without Bastian's interference. We can push Ursan's power there, test him and see how he responds. You did that last night, but together we can press him harder, to the breaking point if we need to.”

Ari chews his lower lip, obviously considering it.

“I have to know if he’ll become his father under stress.” I give Ari a look and let my tone go silky. “And you *like* him, so it shouldn't be a problem.”

Ari gives me a lazy smile as he smooths a palm up my chest. “I always come home to you, my king.”

I grunt, fresh desire stirring at his expert touch. My cum still seeps from his slit, a milky trail of seed dribbling down his scales. Gods, I could fuck him again. Fill him up so he leaks in front of the whole clan. A groan builds in my throat.

His fingers find my nipple. “Maybe you'll like me liking him.”

My breath catches. “Maybe I will,” I murmur before I can stop myself. Then I grab his wrist. “We have to take this seriously.”

He pulls back, irritation sparking in his eyes. “I came home tonight and found you passed out after sneaking off to battle without me. You think I'm not taking this seriously? I did what I had to do tonight and, yeah, I enjoyed it, but don't for one second think I'm not aware of *every* threat we face.”

“I know,” I say quickly, pulling his hand to my lips. I kiss his knuckles, which bear scars from the fighting days he doesn't like to talk about. “I don't think that. I just want us to be careful.”

“Being careful,” he mumbles, only slightly mollified.

With a sigh, I drag him into me and wrap my arms around him. I hold him that way for a moment, wishing the responsibilities of running the syndicate didn't force distance between us. Eventually, the tension eases from his shoulders, and I kiss his temple. “Tomorrow,” I murmur. “We'll take him tomorrow.” *We'll deal with this problem tomorrow.*

He nods. “Tomorrow.”

We stay that way, wrapped up in each other in the quiet of my bedroom. But we both know that *tomorrow* might not solve our problems.

If running the syndicate has taught me anything, it's that *tomorrow* can always make everything worse.

Chapter 9

Ursan

“An island?”

I stare at Ari, excitement and bewilderment like a rapids in my chest. Of all the things I expected him to say when he showed up outside my cave just now, inviting me to his private island was not one of them.

I definitely didn’t expect Triton to show up, too.

I look at the big male, and some of my excitement fades. His handsome face is tough to read, but his thick arms are folded, and his blue tail pumps the sea in precise flicks that send nerves prickling down my spine.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask, turning back to Ari.

“It was my idea,” Triton answers, his deep voice jerking my attention right back to him. Suddenly, he's not hard to read anymore. He’s annoyed, his mouth tightening and his brows drawing together. “And it’s not a request.” He sweeps a hard gaze around the sandy yard. “You’re not safe here alone.”

“I’m not?” I stare at my garden and the shipwreck beyond it. The sea nymphs hover nearby, their round eyes fixed on Triton.

“What Triton means is that you’re inexperienced,” Ari says, moving close and putting a hand on my shoulder. “Yesterday was the first time you’ve ventured out of your cave. The sea is unsettled lately. Triton and I would both feel better if you move somewhere we can keep an eye on you.”

My face heats at the mention of “yesterday.” As if I needed a reminder of what happened. It’s all I’ve thought about since Ari took me home. And before he swam away last night, I took a risk and pressed him against the wall inside my cave.

He let me kiss him—and judging from the way his slit bulged against mine, he liked it. He also didn’t mind when I stroked a tentacle down his tail. In fact, he threw his head back and released a husky moan. For a moment, I thought he was going to touch my dick again—maybe repeat

what we did on the surface. But then he pushed me away with a quiet laugh and said he had to get home.

Yeah, Ari likes me. He's not lying about that.

But Triton…

I swallow as I dare another look at the intimidating male. His blue eyes rest on Ari's hand on my shoulder before sliding over the tattoos that cover my chest. The prickling along my spine moves lower.

Ari squeezes my shoulder before releasing me and floating backward a pace. "You'll like the island." He raises his voice a little. "No harm will come to you there. I vow it."

I can't help but smile. "I'm not worried about that, Ari. I trust you." He kept me safe on the surface. I have no doubt he's the fighter he says he is.

Instead of returning my smile, Ari frowns. He rubs a hand over his mouth. "Yeah, well, we should get going."

"Right now?" I turn toward the cave's entrance, where my pile of forks winks in a wavy beam of sunlight. "I don't need to bring much—"

"You don't need to bring anything," Triton says, and when I spin back, he's closer, his body as big as mine. Ari is smaller, with a wiry strength I feel like I could break if I really wanted to. But Triton is different. He's bigger and more powerfully built, with shoulders that look like they can take out my cave's entrance. We're evenly matched in size, I realize, my chest as wide and muscular as his.

In fact, I'm a touch bigger in this form—at least in my lower half. My tentacles curl along the seabed, the thick muscles in my hips broader than Triton's tail. It wouldn't take much effort at all to wrap the big male up and pull him into me. If I did, our mouths would be level. Last night, Ari's face was slightly below mine, and I had to stoop a bit when we kissed. But kissing Triton would be different. I wouldn't have to stoop.

The sea lord's lips part, and I realize I'm staring at his mouth. I jerk my gaze up and meet frowning blue eyes.

"What are you looking at, boy?" he says gruffly.

"You," I blurt, and now my face prickles. So does my dick, which has stayed more or less hard since Ari touched me. It's like he opened a door I hadn't realized was locked, and now I can't shut it again. In my pouch, my channel grows damp. I don't touch myself there often, but after last night, I find that I want to. Questions spin through my head—things I didn't get a chance to ask Ari last night.

But I'll get a chance if I go to this island.

Triton is still frowning as his blue eyes dip to my chest again. He makes a deep sound in his throat and turns away, his thick tail batting a swift current that brushes against my tentacles. He speaks to Ari over his shoulder as he moves toward the ship. "Let him bring a few trinkets. Whatever gets us out of here faster."

Ari and I watch Triton for a moment. When the sea lord is a safe distance away, I pitch my voice low. "I don't think this is a good idea, Ari. He doesn't like me."

Ari's scar pulls as he smiles. "He likes you just fine, Ursan. He told you, it was his idea to bring you to the island. You'll like it. There's plenty to explore. And the sea nymphs will guard your cave while you're gone." He turns to the nymphs, who have moved closer and now hover beside us. "Won't you, guys?"

Dash swims forward and bobs his head. "Yes, Ari. We'll be here waiting for Ursan's safe return."

Ari looks at me. "That's settled then. Pack a few things, and we'll be on our way."

Minutes later, my excitement is back as I swim in Ari's wake. My bag drags against the water a bit, and I adjust the strap across my chest as I beat my tentacles and propel myself forward. I packed light, bringing only my comb, a mirror, and a wooden carving that looks like a horse on a small pedestal. Like so much of my collection, I don't know what it does. I just enjoy the way it feels in my hand.

Of course, now I know I enjoy the feel of Ari's dick in my hand, too.

I admire the shifting muscles in his back as he swims ahead. He moves beautifully, his emerald tail flicking in the current. The sea grows lighter as we near the surface, the water every shade of blue from pale cerulean to cool aquamarine. I know these colors because I once uncovered a box of clay sticks in my garden. The nymphs called them "crayons."

Ahead, Ari beats his tail once and bursts through the surface. I follow, sucking in air and squinting against the sunlight that blasts me in the face. I'm prepared for it this time, though, and angle my head down so I'm not blinded. Triton has already shifted and stands on the beach. He faces away, his long hair streaming down his broad back. The strands are as varied as some of my other crayons, with streaks of black, pewter, and white. He wears the top half pulled back and fastened in a knot.

His backside is as mouthwatering as Ari's—two round, muscular globes that make my dick plump in my pouch.

Can't think about this now. I jerk my gaze away and focus on pulling myself onto the beach. The change rolls over me, shifting my tentacles into two hairy legs.

"Come on," Ari says, stopping beside me and thrusting a hand out. "The castle is just over that rise."

"Poor choice of words," I mutter, letting him help me stand.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

He gives me a look, and I swear I see humor dancing in his green eyes. He tips his head toward Triton. "Let's go. The big guy doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"I heard that," Triton says without turning around.

Ari's scar pulls as he smiles. "He also has excellent hearing."

A moment later, Triton most definitely hears my gasp as I take in the glittering structure that soars from the center of the small island. My shipwreck has a painting of a castle, but it's nothing like this. The building on that canvas is gray and clunky. *This* is like a sparkling jewel. A dozen towers of various heights rise from the sand, each one perfectly smooth and shimmering in the sunlight. Green and blue sea glass gleams in the windows. Shells frame a pair of double doors made from planks of driftwood.

Ari steps beside me, his head tilted back as he gazes at the castle. "Triton does good work, huh?"

Startled, I look at Triton on my other side. "You made this?"

The sea lord grunts. "It's not that big of a deal."

Ari snorts. "False modesty is a bad look on you, my king." Ari gives me his full attention. "Triton has several gifts, including command of coral and sand."

Curiosity sparks. "What are your gifts, Ari?"

"I don't have any."

"That's not true," Triton says, an edge in his voice.

Ari folds his arms, and he keeps his gaze on Triton even as he addresses me. "It's true enough. I can bite, and I can throw a punch. But I can't work magic. Among the Folk, magical gifts are what separates the

nobility from the commoners. I'm a low-class bottom-feeder. Triton is from a clan of blue bloods."

A muscle twitches in Triton's jaw. "You know I don't care about class. I never have."

"I know, my lord."

"Do you?"

Tension springs between them. I'm not sure how I know, but I can sense this is an old argument—something threadbare and worn-out. It's as if the words are stretched so tightly, they might snap if either male keeps tugging.

And for some reason, I don't want that to happen.

On impulse, I lay a hand on Triton's shoulder. "This castle is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. More stunning than any treasure I've pulled from the seabed."

His eyes widen slightly. "It's…" He clears his throat. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Thank you for showing it to me." I turn to Ari, who's fingering a shell around his neck. "And I have to agree with Triton. You might not be able to make castles, but you're not giftless. Being a good fighter counts for something. I think it counts for a whole lot, Ari."

He swallows, his long fingers still toying with his necklace. Color touches his cheekbones. "Thanks."

I start to turn back to the castle, but my gaze snags on his necklace. It's a small thing—an ordinary seashell on a chain. But something about it makes me want to look more closely. Against my will, I'm drawn to it.

"What's that necklace?" I ask, pointing. Somewhere in my head, I know it's rude to point. The nymphs taught me that years ago. But even as I force my hand down, it wants to come back up again. I want to *hold* the necklace. The urge is so overwhelming, words gather in my throat.

No. Not words. *Demands*. If Ari won't show me the necklace, I'll order him to.

But that's wrong. It's rude and unreasonable to give an order like that. Before I can act on my urges, I stumble backward, my feet sinking into the sand.

Ari squeezes his hand around the shell. All at once, the urge to touch disappears.

In its absence, I back up another step. For a second, my head buzzes, but then it clears. Ari and Triton stare at me, their faces twin masks of

wariness.

"I'm sorry," I say, my cheeks heating. "I…" I swallow, wishing I had more experience with males who aren't the sea nymphs. "Sometimes, my curiosity gets the better of me."

Ari's features smooth out. "It's okay to be curious." He keeps his hand around the shell. "I'm going to see to our dinner. Triton will show you around."

Triton looks at him sharply. An understanding seems to pass between them, and the sea lord grunts again. He folds his arms and turns back to me. "It'll be a quick tour."

Protests gather in my throat, but I've already been rude, so I simply nod and keep my mouth shut. As Ari leaves, I want to follow. Instead, I turn to Triton and force a smile.

"This way," he says, stalking toward the castle. My hearing probably isn't as sharp as his, but as he moves away, I swear I hear him say, "The sooner we get this over with, the better."

THE INSIDE of the sandcastle is just as beautiful as the outside.

Just as I did with Ari in the Hallows, I trail Triton and gawk at my surroundings. The sea lord is most definitely gifted. The castle brims with colorful coral and furniture made from carved driftwood. I quickly lose count of the bedrooms and dining rooms and rooms I don't have names for.

"What's that room for?" I ask, unable to stop myself from asking.

"Living room."

"So you just…live in it?"

Triton pauses and meets my gaze over his shoulder. "Now that I think about it, it *is* kind of a stupid name. Once upon a time, humans called a room like that a *parlor*."

I think it over. "I like that one better."

The corner of his mouth lifts. "Yeah," he says slowly. "I suppose I do, too."

We continue moving, and I continue asking questions as they pop into my head. Which is often.

But Triton doesn't seem to mind. Although, I suppose if anyone is equipped to answer questions about the castle, it's the male who built it.

"Do you build castles like this often?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "My responsibilities keep me busy."

"What are your responsibilities?"

He looks at me from the corner of his eye. "Giving young sea witches guided tours."

I duck my head as my face heats. "Sorry. You must be busy. We don't have to—"

"It's fine," he says, and he gestures me through a pair of doors that lead outside. As we step into the afternoon sunlight, he stops and turns his face up to the sky. "I don't take enough time off, actually. Ari is always after me to go on vacation."

"Where would you go?"

His chest lifts. "Gods, anywhere at this point." He lowers his head and looks at me. "Someplace dry."

I smile. "A desert, then."

"Too much sand."

I picture the globe in my cave. "Antarctica. Cold and dry and no one around for miles."

He grins. "Sounds wonderful."

My heart speeds up. I thought Triton was attractive before. Now that I've seen him smile—*really* smile—I know he's as breathtaking as his castle. Ari called him noble, and I can see why. Triton's features are like the marble bust that sits on the captain's desk in my shipwreck. Like his hair, his blue eyes hold myriad colors—everything from sapphire to seafoam.

And looking into them is all it takes to remind me we're both nude. My dick tightens, blood pumping hard and filling my shaft.

Desperation rising as fast as my dick, I turn to the sandy yard outside the castle. It's mostly barren except for a struggling garden. The plants are pitiful, really—just a few meager rows of shriveled flowers. I move without thinking, walking to the wilted plants. I squat and finger a soft pink petal.

"Oh, you poor thing," I murmur. I rub my thumb gently over the flower, feeling the delicate veins underneath the downy softness. "You just need a little encouragement. Come on," I coax, letting the waves of pleasure roll through me. I feel this way when I tend my own garden. Like I can

make the plants thrive just by asking them to. Maybe I can ask Triton's plants to do the same.

Sure enough, the flower moves under my hand, its petals growing lush and vibrant. It outshines the plants next to it, standing proud and straight with blooms that glow fuchsia in the sun.

"There you go, beauty," I say, hearing the praise ripple in my voice. "You were gorgeous all along. You were just hiding."

A shadow falls over me.

With a lingering stroke along the petal's edge, I stand and face Triton. Then I step out of the way and gesture to the plant. "The blooms would look lovely in a vase, but I hate to cut them. You can, though. I wouldn't mind. I m-mean, it's your garden." I clamp my mouth shut to stop my rambling.

For a long moment, he just stares at the plant. He stares so long, in fact, I worry I've done something wrong.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I should have asked."

"It's okay." He lifts his head at last. Once again, his expression is hard to read. "That's the end of the tour," he says, his voice gruff again. "There's nothing else to see."

Chapter 10

Ari

I suck Triton's balls exactly the way he likes.

On my knees and elbows between his spread thighs, I draw one globe into my mouth and hollow my cheeks. I hold him that way, sucking and tugging just a little too hard. Giving him a hint of teeth that makes him hiss in a breath. After a second, I release the pressure and tongue the delicate skin, flicking gently.

Long fingers tangle in my hair and hold me fast. "Fuck," Triton growls above me, "you know exactly how I like it."

I hum in agreement and let the swollen globe slip from my mouth. I take a moment to admire how it glistens in the moonlight streaming through the windows. When I don't move to his other nut, he tugs at my hair, trying to direct me where he wants me.

"You missed a spot," he growls.

I smile. I could give him what he wants, but that would be too easy for both of us. Besides, we have something to talk about.

And I suspect my king is stalling.

I lick at his heavy sack. "You like him."

Triton's frustrated groan floats down to me at the same moment his fingers in my hair grow painful. He spreads his thighs wider and thrusts against my mouth. "Don't start things you're not prepared to finish."

"I'll finish," I say lightly. When his grip on my hair makes me wince, I lap at his balls again. "Just as soon as you admit you like Ursan."

A second later, I'm flat on my stomach with the Lord of the Sea Syndicate on my back. A heavy thigh shoves mine apart as hot breath sears my nape. "If you're not going to fuck me, I'm going to fuck you."

I turn my head so he can see my smile. "Is that what you think?"

In response, he rolls his hips against my ass, lodging his leaking dick between my cheeks. He leans in, and I feel the sharp sting of his teeth on the shell of my ear. He tugs the same way I tugged his sack. "That's your

problem, Ari," he rasps, his big chest rumbling against my back. "You're all talk and no action."

My breath hitches. I'm hard and leaking, my dick threatening to punch through the bed. The seashell pendant is a weight in the middle of my spine. A heavier weight than Triton. I flung the cursed thing behind me before I started our play. I don't like it hanging between us.

Triton thrusts against me, and I let him, shivering when his dick drags over my hole. I listen for his breath, waiting for him to inhale. When he does, I throw a lightning-fast elbow back, striking him hard in the ribs.

I flip him faster than he flipped me, and I straddle him and pin his arms over his head. When he fights my grip, I dig my thumbs into the nerves in his wrists. Instantly, he goes limp beneath me.

Well, everything but his dick goes limp. His cock stays as hard as mine.

Pain, anger, and lust flash in his eyes. It's a potent combination—one we both enjoy. After a second of passivity, he bucks, trying to throw me off. Trying to best me. In a contest of sheer strength, Triton will beat me every time. But as I taught him long ago, brute force doesn't always win the day.

I ride out his struggles, watching my dick bounce against his chest. I dip my head a few times, biting at the muscle between his neck and shoulder. The third time, I bite until I taste blood—and I come away with a bit of him between my teeth. He heals instantly, but his eyes go wide at my ferocity. My depravity. Even after all this time, Triton occasionally forgets how depraved I can be.

I swallow his flesh and lean over him again. But this time, I kiss him.

He stills—and then he groans, letting me in and then stroking his tongue against mine. He relaxes beneath me, surrendering in his own way. And he lets me steer the kiss, grunting when I suck at his tongue—and hissing when I nip his bottom lip.

At last, I sit up. I release his wrists and take my dick in hand, rocking my hips a little as I stroke myself and leak all over his chest.

"That was a dirty move," he rasps.

I squeeze his hips too hard with my thighs, forcing a pained grunt from him. I lick his blood from my lips. "Which one?"

Blue eyes glitter. "All of them."

"Ah, well, I'm a dirty fighter." I let my voice go silky. "It's my gift, remember?"

“Gifts don’t have to be magical to have value. Even the boy knows that.”

I raise a brow. “So you’ve found common ground with him.” I stroke my dick and huff a breath. “Of course you agree with someone who parrots your opinions.”

Triton grasps my hips and pulls me closer to his face. He wraps his plush lips around my cockhead, sucking me and tonguing my slit before pulling off with a pop. “It’s not an opinion. It’s the truth. You simply delight in being stubborn, so you refuse to admit it.”

I shift backward so he won’t suck me. I can’t think when his mouth is involved, and he knows it.

I move between his legs and wrap a hand around his straining dick. When he props himself on his elbows, I give him a pointed look. “Back to the topic at hand—”

“You sucking my dick instead of running your mouth?”

I give him a warning squeeze. “You like him,” I say again. “Just admit it. And he’s not a boy. He’s on the far side of twenty-five and sexually frustrated enough to breed an entire clan of mermen.”

Triton frowns. “He’s not what I expected. He’s…without artifice.”

My king knows all sorts of fancy words. Another time, I might tease him about it. But I’m reluctant to turn the conversation back to issues that keep us apart. We need to be united in how we handle Ursan.

I rest my palms on Triton's big thighs. “When I first met him, I thought he might be simple. But he’s not. His mind is sharp. It’s just that he never learned to hide how he feels from others. He says exactly what he’s thinking.” I swallow. “I’m not sure he knows how to lie.”

Triton blinks at me. When he speaks, his voice is gruff. “You’ve captured him perfectly.”

“He’s so fucking sweet it terrifies me.”

“For him or for you?”

I snort and dig my fingers into Triton’s thighs. “You worried I’m going to lose my heart?”

Triton sits up and grabs my cock. He puts his thick thighs on the outside of mine and tugs at my shaft. He speaks in a gruff whisper against my lips. “I stole your cold, shriveled heart a long time ago, Ari Razorfin.”

“True,” I say on a shudder.

He grips me harder, stroking his fist up and down my eager dick. “But if you want to fuck him, I don’t object.”

“You want him too,” I point out. “You were practically drooling on his chest in that cave.”

He rewards my insolence with a particularly vicious tug on my dick. “He’s not going to stay sweet and innocent for long. He’s powerful.”

“No shit. I told you this.”

Another brutal tug. “Well, now I've seen it for myself. He revived a flower in the garden today.”

“Thank the gods. That weed patch is embarrassing.”

Triton’s hand on my dick slows. “You really don’t think he’s a threat?”

I take a moment to consider the question. And I choose my words carefully when I answer. I don’t want any confusion between Triton and me. We can’t afford it with something this important.

“Like Nature,” I say finally, “magic is ambivalent. Is a lightning bolt evil? Not on its own. It can kill, but it doesn’t *want* to kill. Only a mind can want or need. Ursan is powerful. How powerful, I don’t know. But I don’t want to kill him. Just like I don’t want to kill the lightning bolt. And I don’t believe he wants or needs to kill, either.”

And deep down, I know my reluctance to kill will most likely be my end. Not necessarily with Ursan, but perhaps with another. Against a different opponent in a different time and place, my hesitation—my *weakness*—will spell my death. I knew it when I fought in the Deep. I tell myself I fled because I wanted a better life. But that’s a lie.

The cold, hard truth is much simpler. I ran away because I’m weak.

Triton rests his forehead against mine and breathes me in. He strokes his fingers over my temple, and I hear the rasp of the short, bristly hairs there. His touch pulls me from the dark corners of my mind, drawing me away from the edge of the pit that always lurks there.

“You believe he could be a partner,” Triton murmurs, stating the plain truth we both danced around last night. “An asset to the syndicate.”

“Yes.”

“You want to guide him.”

I nod. “It’s in our best interests. It’s also good for the syndicate. We need him. More than that, we owe him.”

Triton pulls back, his expression serious. “A debt. One long overdue.”

“I would have us pay it,” I say quietly. “I want to make amends.”

He stares at me for a long moment. Then he rubs his thumb over my lip, tracing the edge of my scar. “You know I can’t deny you anything.”

A knot of tension inside me loosens. As it unravels, my erection roars back to life. I roll my hips, grinding my cock against Triton’s. “So we’re in agreement?”

He hauls me into his lap and palms my ass. “Yes.” He squeezes hard, stilling my movements. “But Ari?”

I freeze, instantly recognizing the shift from lover to king. “Yes?”

Hard blue eyes hold mine. “The past stays buried. Understand?”

Crallek. Triton doesn’t want Ursan to know the truth about his father’s fate. I nod again, knowing I just received a command. “I understand, my king.”

Big hands caress my ass and then skim down my cleft. “Now, back to what you were doing before.”

“Mmm.” I wrap my arms around his neck and work my hips against his. “Keep messing around back there, and my plans are going to change *very* quickly.”

Without warning, he whips his head toward the door. His body goes rigid, and he thrusts a finger against my lips. After a second, he lowers his hand from my mouth. “It’s rude to listen at closed doors,” he calls out.

A few beats pass, and then a red-faced Ursan opens the door and steps inside. He holds a loose hand over his groin as he darts a gaze up and then jerks it back down. “I couldn’t sleep, and I thought I’d take a walk in the garden, and then I passed your room and…” He stares at the floor like he wishes it would open up and swallow him. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Triton and I exchange a look. Thinking to make everyone more comfortable, I gave Ursan a pair of sweatpants before dinner. He tents the front of them now, his hand doing little to cover his straining dick.

Taking pity on him, I extricate myself from Triton and extend a hand toward Ursan. “But you heard us, and now you’re as hard as a limpet’s tooth.”

He stares at my hand.

“Well, come on,” I say.

Ursan swallows thickly, his eyes darting to Triton. “You mean…”

I hide a smile. “You’ve got two choices, Ursan. You can go to the garden and jerk into the sand alone, or you can come over here and learn how to give a blow job.”

Ursan walks to the bed.

"Good choice," I say, taking his hand and tugging him down next to me. "Lose the sweats."

He's not accustomed to his bipedal form just yet, and he's all elbows and knees for a second as he untangles his sweats from his ankles. But he manages it eventually, and then he kneels beside me, his thick cock standing at attention with a bead of precum dangling from the prominent slit.

"Good boy," I murmur, knowing how much he likes that particular praise. As expected, his nostrils flare, and those chocolate-brown eyes turn liquid with need.

I pivot on my knees so I'm facing him. "Remember what I said about consent?"

"Yeah," he rasps.

I rest a hand on his thigh. "Would you like it if I kissed you right now?"

He opens his mouth, then shuts it and glances at Triton.

"Don't worry about him," I say. "If he had a problem with me kissing you, he would have already said so."

Triton watches Ursan with glittering blue eyes. Like most of the Folk, he's not shy about his body. He reclines against the pillows, one leg drawn up, his big cock lying hard and heavy against his muscular thigh. Blue eyes roam over Ursan's chest, and I know my king is thinking about how much he'd like to trace the edges of Ursan's ink with his tongue. Triton is, as I say, a boob man. Give him a pair of round pecs to bite down on, and he's as happy as a clam. Every merman at court knows the way into the king's heart—or at least into his favor.

I grasp Ursan's jaw and pull him in for a slow, easy kiss. He's a fast learner, because he strokes his tongue with mine in a sensual dance, giving and taking at just the right moments. It's far hotter than I anticipated, and my heart races as I pull back.

I drag a hand through my hair and move between Triton's spread thighs. I grasp Triton's dick and slant Ursan a smile. "When mermen play, we service the king first. Triton is both king of our clan and Lord of the Sea Syndicate, so his dick most definitely gets sucked before anyone else's."

Ursan's chest rises and falls rapidly as he stares at Triton's cock in my hand. "Okay," he breathes. His gaze skids to mine, and his voice is raspy as

he asks, “D-Do you…play like this often? In groups?”

I dip my head and lick precum from Triton’s slit. “We’re a lusty species, Ursan. There’s pleasure to be found in watching your mate receive pleasure from another.” As soon as I finish my sentence, I wish I’d phrased it differently. Triton and I have never mated. We’re not official, but as far as I’m concerned, the mating pearl on my necklace belongs to him. I believe he feels the same about me. And yet…we’ve never taken that final step. Something always seems to get in the way. Duty. Another uprising. A stupid argument we resolve and then forget about.

He moves restlessly under my hand, reminding me I have a task to finish.

I give my king a firm stroke and address Ursan again. “The best way to learn how to do this is to watch.” That advice dispensed, I open wide and swallow Triton’s dick.

He thrusts eagerly into my mouth, and I know he likes Ursan watching. Already, his dick spurts shots of salty precum into my mouth. I swallow it and bob on his dick, hollowing my cheeks on the upstroke. When I’ve gotten him wet enough, I slide a finger under his sack and trace his rim. He grunts and spreads his legs, and I massage my saliva into his tight hole.

Ursan’s breathing is a heavy rasp, his regard like a weight against my side. I pull off Triton’s dick to catch my breath, and I turn to Ursan and find his brown eyes sheened with green.

“How do you feel?” I ask, aware that Triton is watching Ursan as closely as I am.

Ursan licks his lips. “I… I’m aching.” His eyes slide shut, and he seems to wrestle with strong emotion. But it’s not the desire to impose his will, I realize with relief.

No, it’s just old-fashioned desire.

I wait for him to open his eyes. When he does, I brush a hand over his big thigh. “After I finish Triton, would you like me to finish you?”

His mouth works. “You mean… You would—”

“Suck your dick.” I pop my finger into my mouth and return it to Triton’s ass.

“Fuck you, Ari,” the Lord of the Sea rasps. “Hurry the fuck up.”

“So impatient,” I murmur, but I obey my king. I suck him hard as I probe his ass and find his sweet spot. Two firm strokes and he comes on a

bellow, his hot seed filling my mouth.

I jack him and drink him down, and then I sit up and turn to Ursan. Chocolate-brown eyes follow my every move as I wipe the cum dribbling from the corners of my lips.

I'm a gifted fighter. I'll give Triton that. But I have another gift, and it's knowing how to please a male. How to give him precisely what he needs in the moment. And at this moment, I know Ursan needs my submission. Inexperienced he might be, but I was paying attention last night, and I didn't miss how much he enjoyed shoving me against the wall of his cave after we returned from the surface. He might like being a "good boy" on occasion, but there's a dominant male under those tattoos. Hints of that dominance peek from his eyes now as he sizes me up, waiting for my next move.

I give it to him, crawling on my hands and knees and nuzzling his thigh with my cheek.

He sucks in a sharp breath. After a moment's hesitation, he strokes a big hand over my hair. "Suck me," he whispers. "I want it."

Triton shifts and then looms behind me. A second later, he grasps my dick and pulls it backward between my thighs.

I groan.

Ursan groans.

Triton gives my throbbing dick slow, steady strokes. "You're going to have a belly full of cum tonight, Ari." There's a soft, wet popping sound, and then his damp finger teases my asshole. I shudder against Ursan's thigh and bow my spine, my mind filling with wicked images of my body speared at both ends by this pair of large males. Fuck, *there's* a use for Ursan's mirror.

"Ari," Ursan says, his voice somewhere between a groan and a growl, "you have to hurry. *Please*."

Behind me, Triton chuckles. He pushes his finger deeper inside me, setting off a delicious burn. "Sounds like I'm not the only one who gets impatient with your games."

"It's called foreplay, asshole," I mutter.

Triton uses his finger in my ass to push me forward. "Suck his dick, and then you can argue with me."

It's hard to concentrate with Triton's hand wrapped around my cock, but I do my best. I want to make this good for Ursan. I grasp his thick

length and suck his tip into my mouth.

He comes instantly, filling my mouth with hot cum. It takes me by surprise, but I adjust, breathing through my nose and gulping to keep up with him.

With a muffled shout, he grabs my head and shudders hard, his hips jerking rhythmically. Triton finishes me off with a couple more tugs, and I come on a groan, rocking and swallowing and sucking at Ursan's cock until it softens. With a final hum, I let it slip from my mouth just as Triton pulls his hands from my body.

Ursan sits hard on his ass, then brings a knee up and leans his forehead against it. "I'm sorry," he mumbles in a tone soaked in misery. "I couldn't wait."

Something tugs at my heart. With a jolt, I realize it's tenderness. Tapping speed I honed in the fighting pits, I grab him around the shoulders and pull him down so he's sandwiched between me and Triton. Wide, chocolate-brown eyes surrounded by thick lashes blink at me.

I scrape my thumb over Ursan's pink-tinged cheekbone. "Do you know the best thing about blow jobs?"

"No," he rasps.

"You can have as many as you want."

Relief—and the stirring of fresh desire—moves through his eyes. He turns his head and meets Triton's gaze on his other side.

Triton parks a hand under his head and shrugs a meaty shoulder. "As long as you don't snore."

"I d-don't," Ursan says. "At least, I don't think so."

I turn Ursan's head back to me with a finger on his jaw. "Good. Now, go to sleep." I wink at him and close my eyes. "And if you're a very good boy," I murmur, "I'll show you something called *breakfast in bed* in the morning."

Chapter 11

Triton

I lie awake for a long time after Ari and Ursan drift off to sleep. Eventually, I roll over and study the witch in slumber. He's no less striking in his human form than he is under the waves. His chocolate-brown hair is mussed from our play, and the hint of a five o'clock shadow covers his strong jaw.

Seeing him tonight, I have to agree with Ari. The sea witch bears no resemblance to Crallek in temperament. He's sweet in a way his father never was, not even when we were young. But as Ari pointed out, there's an aggressive streak under Ursan's blushing cheeks and timid smiles. He's an adult male with all the instincts and urges that come with it. Will his dominance tip into demand if he's denied? How far will Ursan go to get what he wants, and how will he react when someone tells him *no*? Ursan has barely been nurtured. What's his nature?

These are the things I need to know.

The seashell pendant nestles among the tangle of necklaces around Ari's neck. Ursan sensed it when we came onto shore today. Crallek's power would defy the grave, reaching across time and space to live again in his son. And that can't happen. In many ways, Ari and I bear responsibility for what Crallek became. We lied to ourselves, denying the seriousness and rapidity of his descent. His power ate away at his mind like poison, and we refused to see it. When he slaughtered enemy clans for sport, we made excuses for him. When he tortured and maimed, we hesitated to kill him. We waited.

We almost waited too long. We came so close to losing everything. Crallek would have gone from syndicate to syndicate, toppling the power structures put in place after the Myth rebuilt the human plane. He would have brought it all crashing down. How many died because Ari and I hesitated? How many suffered because we failed to act? Ursan's power is the same as Crallek's. Potent. Seductive. Catastrophic if left unchecked.

Bastian's warning rings in my head. *"There's never been a sea witch in recorded history who didn't turn bad."*

Is it fair to paint father and son with the same broad brush? Or am I hesitating again?

"Is a lightning bolt evil?"

Ari always claims he's not a deep thinker. The uneducated product of base bottom-feeders. But he captured our dilemma perfectly. *"Only a mind can want or need."*

What does Ursan want? What does he need? I've allowed my fear and cowardice to rob him of the latter. And now I'm not sure he knows how to ask for the former. Again, Ari is right. I owe Ursan a chance to explore both. I have an obligation to let him be his own person without the shadow of Crallek's legacy. But I also have a responsibility to the syndicate and all the creatures within it. Lightning isn't evil. But it can kill. It can stop a heart. Destroy a building.

However, I'm in a unique position. I can test the lightning. I just have to hope it doesn't strike me down. And I have to live with the guilt of knowing I can never beg its forgiveness. Because I can't tell it I'm responsible for its loneliness and a childhood spent locked away from the world.

Reaching over, I unclasp the seashell necklace and gently lift it away from Ari's chest. His brow furrows, but he stays asleep, his long, red lashes dusting his freckled cheeks.

I fasten the pendant around my neck and lean back. Its burden settles over me, but I ignore it as Ursan's soft snores rise above the bed. Well, he was wrong about that.

I have to hope Ari and I aren't wrong about the rest of him.

Outside the window, moonlight sparkles over the sea and the long stretch of beach. The island is peaceful. Protected from the dangers of the syndicate. I built it to be a refuge. Now, it'll be Ursan's proving ground. I don't know if Bastian's assertions about sea witches are true. The Myth is full of powerful creatures who live very long lives. Power inspires jealousy, and jealousy can lead to rumors and half-truths.

I can't judge Ursan on legends and my advisor's bias. Before I act, I have to *know* for myself what's true.

My eyelids droop, the battle in the kelp forest catching up with me. With a sigh, I sink into the pillows. I let sleep claim me, my dreams full of

thick tentacles and a weight that threatens to drag me to the floor of the sea.

The moment I open my eyes, I know Ari's promise of breakfast in bed will have to wait. For one thing, we don't have time for that kind of indulgence. The sharkmen have been defeated, but other threats will take their place.

Two, Ursan is already up. He stands at the window, his nude body limned in morning sunlight.

It's hard to pull my eyes away, so I don't. Propping myself on my elbows, I drink him in for a minute, letting my gaze roam from his brown hair ruffling in the slight breeze to the long, elegant sweep of his spine to his tight, round ass. My blood pumps harder as my eyes linger on the juicy swells.

Ari sits up on my other side. Drowsy green eyes blink at me and then go on a journey, traveling to Ursan before returning to me and then dipping to my cock. When they fill with a knowing look, I palm Ari's face and shove his obnoxious smile away.

“Time to get up,” I announce, swinging my legs off the bed. “We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Ursan turns from the window. His cheeks color faintly as he notices my erection. “Busy?”

I nod as I snatch my sweatpants from the floor and pull them on. “You worked on my garden yesterday. It could use more tending.” I toss him his sweatpants.

He catches them effortlessly, then holds them against his hips as confusion fills his eyes. “Now?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You have something more important to do?”

His eyes dart to Ari, who’s rising behind me and reaching for his own sweats. “No.” Ursan clears his throat, his gaze shifting back to me. “I'll be happy to take a look at the garden.”

“Glad to hear it. This way.” I leave before he can say anything else. I stride through the sun-drenched, sandy halls, willing my dick to go down. I need a clear head if I’m going to push Ursan to his limits. And I need *him* hard—and hungry and thrown off balance. Right about now, he's probably questioning his decision to come to the island.

Good. The more uncomfortable he is, the greater the chances he'll be tempted to tap his power and impose his will.

I reach the garden and stare at the vibrant flower among the shriveled rows of sickly plants. The solitary bloom Ursan spoke to yesterday looks even healthier this morning, its fuschia petals shining in the sun.

“My people are builders,” I say as Ursan comes to my side. “We command the hard structures of the sea. Coral and sand. Sediment and shale.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ari lean against the doorway leading from the castle to the patio. “But our gifts don't extend to softer things. I can't coax plantlife into growing.” I look at Ursan. “But you can.”

Ursan turns doubt-filled eyes to mine. “I don’t know how I do what I do. I just…talk.”

I brush my fingertips over the base of his throat. “Yes. That’s your gift. It’s a powerful one.”

He blinks. “I'm not powerful.” He looks at the garden. “Just because I’m good with plants—”

“It’s more than that. Sea witches typically manifest one of three powers.” I tick items off my fingers. “Persuasion, precognition, or reduction. Your power is persuasive. If you want something badly enough, Ursan, you can make it happen. All you have to do is focus and use your voice.”

He stares at me, doubt and wonder swirling in his eyes. “Why don't I know any of this?”

Ari's regard burns the side of my face. I don’t dare look in his direction as I say, “Sea witches are rare, probably because you’re so powerful. Magic craves balance.”

Ursan turns to the garden. Slowly, a smile spreads over his face. “Wow. I never…” He lifts a big arm and scratches the back of his head. “I mean, I guess it makes sense. I've noticed changes over the past few years. My garden back home thrives when I talk to the flowers.” He flashes me a wide grin. “This is going to come in handy when I clean my treasures. I can just tell the barnacles to get lost.”

Anger rises in my chest. His power isn't a cute magic trick. It has the potential to destroy everything, including his mind.

I grip his shoulder and push him to the edge of the flower bed. He loses his balance for a second, one bare foot sinking into the dirt before I

steady him with a rough hand. “Fix everything,” I order. “Every single plant.”

He gives me a startled look. “Why—?”

“Because you can.” I move behind him and grip his waist. “Because I rule here, and I told you to.”

His dark head turns, his eyes searching for Ari.

“No,” I scold, moving swiftly to block his view. “Ari is my subject as much as you are. He won't help you.” And if the situation weren't so serious, I could almost laugh. Ursan has it in his head that Ari is the gentler one between the two of us. It's a common enough mistake, but a mistake all the same. If Ari had been at my side yesterday, he might have eaten one of Brek's brothers and let the other live just so the miserable fuck would spend the rest of his days spreading the tale.

But right now, Ari is a useful distraction. Ursan is flustered, his attention divided between the threat I pose and the illusion of safety Ari offers from the doorway.

“I gave you an order, witch,” I say, getting in Ursan’s face. We’re the same height. About the same build. I let my chest brush his, my necklaces catching on his nipples, which have gone tight with fear and perhaps a little desire. “Now turn around and fix my garden like a good boy.”

His nostrils flare. *Ah.* So he's versatile in his dominance. I wonder if Ari has figured that out yet. Probably.

Ursan's throat bobs as he swallows. Confusion—and something that might be hurt—clouds his brown eyes, but he faces the garden. He’s still too polite to tell me off.

“Good,” I murmur, slipping behind him. I place my hands on his hips and speak in his ear, letting my lips brush his skin. I pitch my voice low, my tone suggestive. “Show me what you do when you're alone.” I catch his lobe in my teeth briefly, and he shivers. “Pretend it's just you by yourself in your garden. Fix everything. Make it all bloom. Be a good boy, and maybe I’ll give you a reward.”

His back is warm against my chest. He smells of salt and sun and clean sweat left over from the things we did in bed last night. My dick hardens, and I push it into his ass, nestling my hard length between his cheeks. He jumps and starts to turn again, but I dig my fingers into his hips and hold him still.

“We'll stand here all day if we have to,” I warn, flipping my tone back to anger. “Do what I say.”

A tremor ripples through him, and I can almost see his mind working as he tries to figure out why I’m jerking him back and forth like this. After a moment's hesitation, he begins to speak. But his voice is tentative, his words fumbling and uncertain. “R-Rise,” he rasps. “Lift your h-heads to the sun.”

Green pinpoints quickly dot the garden’s surface. Just as quickly, they brown and crumble into the dirt.

I nuzzle his neck, my chin brushing his shoulder. “You're not trying very hard.”

His shoulders lift as he draws a sharp breath. “You're—”

“What about me?” I snap, reaching around him and gripping his throat. “This isn’t about me. It’s about you.” I squeeze, my palm over the spot where his power lives. “It's all about you and what you're failing to do. Try again.” I relax my grip but keep my hand in place.

He exhales noisily and speaks, his voice rumbling against my hand. He gets two words out and jerks against my grip. “I can't—” He sucks in another breath. “Let me go, and I'll try.”

“No.” I move my other hand to his stomach and splay my palm over his taut abs. I slide my hand down, slipping under his waistband and letting my fingers graze the thatch of dark curls above his cock. His erection tents the front of his sweats. I know if I swipe my hand over his cockhead I'll find him dripping. “You're terrible at obeying orders. If you were a merman at my court, I'd throw you out of my clan.”

His shoulders jerk again, and *finally* his voice goes gruff. Anger colors his tone. “Maybe it's a good thing I'm not a merman.”

“Maybe it is.” I seize his dick in a hard grip and stroke. “Grow the fucking garden.”

“Ahh!” He bucks his hips. Tries to turn and then sucks in a pained breath when I stop stroking and squeeze hard instead. “Why are you d-doing this?” he asks, his voice angry and bewildered.

“I'm the king,” I say bluntly. I give his dick a rough pump, pulling a moan from him. “You're a sea witch in my territory, and I want to know what you can do.” Another pump. I release his neck long enough to jerk his sweats down. Then I grab his dick again and yank him hard against my chest. I grind my cock against his ass forcefully enough to jostle him off his

feet. “So do it, or I'll keep you on the edge until you beg me to let you come.”

“I—”

His voice cuts off as I squeeze his throat, depriving him of oxygen. I hold him there for a second, then release.

He coughs, shoulders heaving as he sucks in air. “You can’t—”

“Wrong. I can do whatever I want.” I squeeze his throat as I jerk his cock. I tighten and release, alternating the strength of my grip in each hand. I press my cheek to the firm edge of his jaw, my stubble catching on his. “And I want you to use your power and grow my *fucking* garden.”

He struggles, the big muscles in his back flexing. Angry sounds spill from him—grunts and growls and more than a few moans. His throat vibrates under my palm.

“You want to come, don’t you,” I say in his ear. I don’t ask. I don’t have to. His weeping dick gives me the answer.

“Yes,” he growls when I give him enough air to speak. His throat grows hot against my palm. The shell pendant around my neck does the same. *Like calls to like.* The father’s power recognizes the son’s.

I loosen my grip on Ursan’s neck and brace myself for him to command me to release him. Order me to stop. Tell me to go fuck myself.

“Grow,” he gasps, his voice echoing. The dirt at our feet trembles and begins to shift. “Rise up!”

Wilted vines shiver, then slowly turn toward him. I hold my breath as they seem to await his command.

“THRIVE!” he says, and now the ground shakes. The pendant sears my chest, burning a brand into my skin.

Row after row, dying plants shift and stretch toward the sun. Limp petals shimmer and glow, pops of color appearing. Reds and blues and vibrant yellows fill my vision.

“Grow,” Ursan commands, his voice echoing off the sandy walls that surround the patio. *“LIVE.”*

The flowers leap to his command, stalks bursting from the ground and shooting into the sky. Fat blossoms unfurl, the petals shiny with health. Stamens grow thick with pollen. In a riot of movement and color, the garden revives, drenching the air with the heady perfume of a hundred different species of flowers. The stalks thicken and gleam a healthy green. Buds fill and swell and then pop open. Blooms as big as my head sway in

the breeze. Thick leaves tremble, their surfaces traced with plump veins. Even the dirt grows richer, the brown dark and rich like chocolate. Like Ursan's eyes.

He keeps talking, issuing commands that pull new flowers from the soil. His power flares all around us, thick waves of it brushing my skin and ruffling my hair. The air gleams faintly green as his gift ripples and grows, folding in on itself and then flaring wider.

Awe spreads through me. I'm drawn to living things. It's in my blood. Seeing my clan and castle destroyed ripped a hole in my heart. Rebuilding went a long way toward healing it.

But this…

Ursan's power is mesmerizing. He's stronger than his father. Crallek couldn't do things like this at Ursan's age.

Vines shiver over the ground and climb up the walls. The patio fills with flowers, every color and combination of colors popping hundreds of times over. I stare at all of it, my breath caught in my lungs.

Eventually, I realize Ursan has gone silent. He reaches up and tugs my hand from his throat. Slowly, he turns around, and brown eyes sheened with green meet mine.

His big fingers circle my wrist, and he brings my hand to his cock. "I'll have that reward now," he rasps.

We stare at each other. His eyes dare me to deny him.

I stroke. Gaze locked with his, I pump my hand up and down his straining erection, slicking him with his own moisture. He stands strong before me, a defiant look in his eyes. They narrow as his breath quickens, his body swaying in sync with my tugs on his dick.

"Keep going," he murmurs, "just like that." He shudders, pink tinging his cheeks. But it's not shyness now. The flush turns ruddy and creeps down his neck, staining the edges of the tattoos that sprawl across his thick chest. His nipples are two dusky pebbles, his round, ink-covered pecs gilded by the sun.

Fuck. My dick bobs, the tip brushing the cotton of the gray sweatpants Ari always seems to find so amusing. He never tells me why, just winks and says "trust me." Probably, it's a surface thing. For some reason, he's always been fascinated by the world above the sea. Another thing he shares with Ursan.

Flowers wave around me, the stalks reaching to my head. Ursan's lips part as his breathing grows ragged. His dark eyes hold mine captive. The fleshy sound of my palm stroking his dick makes me bite back a groan.

He grunts, eyes narrowing. His brows pull together, and he lets out a masculine whimper. "I'm…"

"Come on," I growl, stroking so fast my hand becomes a blur. "Come get your reward."

He grits his teeth. Shudders. Then he gives a choked cry and soaks my hand.

"That's a good boy," I say, stroking him through it. "My very good boy." I keep tugging at his length until it begins to soften.

He sags, and I catch him, stumbling a little under his weight. He rests his cheek against my shoulder and breathes. But he doesn't stay there long. When he lifts his head, I see a new emotion in his eyes.

Distrust.

He steps back. Instantly, he's unsteady with his sweats around his ankles. He yanks them up with jerky movements and pins me with a censuring look. "Why?" he asks hoarsely. He's trembling a little, no doubt jittery from the orgasm he needed but didn't necessarily want. "Why did you do that, Triton?"

I draw an even breath and try to ignore the nausea burning my throat. "Did it make you angry?"

"I didn't like it," he snaps.

"You could make me regret it."

His brow furrows. "What?"

"Punish me. Make sure I never do that to you again. The sea is a cutthroat place." I look over my shoulder. Ari stands a few steps behind me, his arms folded and his expression inscrutable. I turn back to Ursan. "We don't let insults go unpunished. We can't."

Ursan's eyes shift to Ari. Something joins the distrust. *Disappointment.*

"Your power isn't limited to plants," I say.

Ursan's gaze flicks back to me. His frown deepens, anger and confusion in his eyes. But there's curiosity too. It doesn't surprise me now. Above all things, he's curious about the world.

I nod. "You can command anything that possesses a will. Plants are easier to control than people, but I expect you'll grow proficient at that too."

His lips part. “You mean…”

“Anything you want someone to do, Ursan, you can make it happen. Life and death. Love and hate. Lust and revulsion. Do you understand? *Anything* you want.”

His eyes dart from me to Ari and back again. “I don’t believe you.”

I spread my arms. “Try it. Make me kneel before you.”

The revulsion I referenced passes over his face. “I don’t want that.”

“But you didn’t like what I did.” I step toward him. “You don’t want me to do it again. I could, though.” I bare my fangs. “I will…unless you’re too much of a coward to stop me.”

Green flashes in his eyes as he goes toe to toe with me, our chests brushing. “I am *not* a coward,” he rumbles, his hot breath coasting over my mouth.

“Then make me kneel.”

“I won’t use my power that way!”

“Do it.”

He shoves me, his eyes sheened with that dark, ominous green. “You don’t get to tell me what to do,” he snarls, furious at last. “Why can’t you just say you’re sorry!”

“Make me.”

Growling, he gives my shoulder another hard shove.

Suddenly, I feel his power. Wriggling and insidious, it scratches at the edges of my mind. Then it…softens. Turns warm and liquid, a lazy current flowing over my consciousness. Ursan’s lips move, but I no longer hear him. And I’m not sure I care. My drive to test him dissipates, leaving something easy and languid behind.

Contentment. Brief but powerful, it wraps around my mind and squeezes like a gentle hug.

Total peace. For a moment, I am completely, utterly at peace.

Then it’s gone.

I sway, a wave of dizziness washing over me as bliss flits away. For a second, I could almost weep at its loss.

Ursan steadies me with a warm hand on my shoulder, his brown eyes inches from mine.

“What…?” I lick my lips. “You did something.”

“I stopped you,” he says quietly. He drops his hand and steps back. “I won’t force you to kneel, Triton, and I won’t make you say you’re sorry. An

apology is something you give, not take." He lifts his chin, dark eyes brimming with regret. "I'm sorry I made you stop. I'd… I'd like to go home now, if that's alright with you."

"No." Ari steps beside me. He lifts a hand, then lowers it. Gives me a helpless look I'm sure is reflected in my face. Finally, he gestures behind Ursan. "Look," he tells him. "Please."

After a brief hesitation, Ursan turns. The three of us stand among the overgrown flowers. Somewhere in the garden, a bee buzzes softly. Ari moves next to Ursan so they're shoulder to shoulder with their backs to me.

"Look at everything you can do," Ari tells Ursan. "You made all of this." He looks at Ursan, his auburn eyelashes turned to tiny fans of fire by the sun. "And you can unmake it."

Ursan looks at him, and now I see them both in profile. "You mean…"

"Kill it." Ari keeps his eyes on Ursan as he sweeps a hand toward the flowers. "You could destroy everything with a word, and you can do the same to any living thing, from the tiniest, simplest mind to the most complicated beings on this plane. You could kill Triton. Make him gouge his own eyes out."

Ursan recoils. "I don't want to do that."

"But you could," Ari insists. He faces Ursan fully and grasps his hand. "Yours is an awesome gift, Ursan. I don't have any magic. I don't know what it's like to possess that kind of power." He glances at me. "I don't know what it's like to be a king or"—he gropes for a word—"in charge. The sea is vast, and Triton is responsible for all of it. He had to know what you're capable of."

Ursan makes an exasperated sound. "He could have asked me."

"No," Ari says, shaking his head. "There's a difference between hearing something and truly *knowing* it." He exhales, his beautiful, scarred face more open than I've seen it in years. Maybe ever. "This is something Triton had to *know*."

Silence descends over the patio. Even the bee is quiet in the heaviness of the moment. The three of us wait.

I waited too long. I left Ursan in that cave. I lied to myself, pretending it didn't matter. That I had done something good by sending him away instead of killing him.

Ursan looks at me. His gaze is steady, the hint of a challenge in it. "Did you find out what you needed to know?"

I open my mouth. But it takes a moment before I can rasp, “Yes.” I clear my throat. “Yes, Ursan.”

He nods once.

“I’ll take you home if you want,” Ari tells him. As Ursan’s gaze flicks back to him, Ari swallows thickly. “But I’d like you to stay. Triton and I would both like you to stay.”

My feet carry me to Ursan’s side. “I would like that. And…I’m sorry.” *For so much more than I can tell you.*

A beat passes. Then he whispers, “Don’t do that again.”

“I won’t.”

Ari squeezes Ursan’s hand. “The sea is dangerous. But it’s also beautiful. Swim with us today. Let us show you some of its beauty.”

Protests jump to my lips. We’re all riled. Unsettled. Maybe a jaunt through the open sea isn’t the best idea. But as the tension leaves Ursan’s shoulders, I swallow my arguments. The sea has always been so beautiful to me—its dangers rendering its glories all the more precious. Maybe Ari is right.

Maybe that’s exactly what Ursan needs to see.

Chapter 12

Ari

I hang back for a while, trailing Triton and Ursan as they hop from current to current.

Initially, I planned to stick to Ursan's side. I was reluctant to leave him alone with Triton after the test in the garden. But seeing them together changed my mind. At first, I indulged myself for the sheer pleasure of it, swimming in their wake with my eyes glued to their powerful bodies.

Then I saw the rays.

Triton has always attracted them. Stingrays are nosy fuckers. They'll streak off at the drop of a hat if they sense danger. But the moment they feel comfortable, they're up in everybody's business, galloping playfully and hoping for head scratches.

I'm used to seeing a few rays here and there, especially when I swim with Triton. But this is different.

They came slowly at first—harmless nuisances sweeping their big wings through the currents on either side of me. I rolled my eyes and ignored them as I flicked my tail hard to keep up with Triton and Ursan.

Then more rays came. Then more. Their numbers swelled, growing impossible to dismiss. They surrounded me—and ignored *me*, soaring around my tail like they might avoid a piece of flotsam. After a few seconds of confusion, I realized why.

They came for Ursan.

Up ahead, Triton veers left and dips into a blue lagoon. Ursan follows with a swish of his tentacles.

And the stingrays follow. Thousands of them wheel in a big arc, their broad wings curled up in flight. Little mouths curved in contented smiles.

They continue following as Ursan and Triton dive into a deep, verdant valley. The sunlight is sparse down here, but my night vision is excellent—one of the few advantages of being born in the Deep. The valley comes alive with electric color that illuminates the valley's walls, which glow with

red and purple algae. On the opposite side of the valley, a broad, flat rock overlooks a cliff.

As I slow, the stingrays wheel again, their broad bodies angled like the kites humans sometimes fly when I perch on my rock in the harbor.

At last, Triton turns, his powerful tail beating the water. Ursan turns with him, and his brown eyes go wide as he glimpses the rays. He spins slowly, tentacles waving as he watches their flight. They form a big circle around him and Triton, their wide, flat bodies arranged in an elegant formation as they fly in a holding pattern.

I hover on the outside of the circle, my chest swelling with something that feels like awe. It takes a lot for me to feel this way about the ocean. It's not that I don't appreciate its beauty. But it's hard to stop and admire pretty things when you're constantly watching for knives aimed at your back.

I'm not watching for knives now. The awe keeps pumping as I turn, tracking the rays. Various subspecies make up the fevers, which have to number in the hundreds. For as friendly as they are, stingrays don't typically gather in large groups. But they've come together for this. For Ursan. Maybe it's curiosity. Maybe they sense a kindred spirit in the sea witch. But something tells me it's more than that.

Triton catches my eye, his expression letting me know he's been aware of the rays from the beginning. He takes Ursan's arm and leans into him, his lips moving as he says something in Ursan's ear. Ursan gives him a startled look, and Triton smiles and gestures to the stingrays.

My awe shifts to puzzlement as I watch Ursan swim forward. He glances back at Triton, who gives him an encouraging nod. Ursan keeps going. Just when it looks like he'll smash into the circling stingrays, they part around him. He darts forward, and they quickly close the gap. After a brief hesitation, he swims to the center of the circle.

Immediately, the rays dip, tilting their wings in salute. They streak around him, their angled bodies obscuring Triton on the other side of the circle. They stir the sea, raising a cascade of bubbles that flood the valley. A few tickle my nose, and I sneeze and shove them away.

Ursan laughs, his head tipped back and his arms stretched out to the sides. His laugh is rich and deep. Completely unguarded. But there's depth to it. I thought him simple when I first met him—a still surface never disturbed. Now I think there might just be oceans inside him.

The rays keep spinning, their bodies flitting so quickly past Triton that they reveal him to me. My breath hitches when I see the look on his face. He watches Ursan, his features covered in raw, unfiltered happiness. He looks as he did when I first met him—young and unburdened by the cares of the syndicate. He laughed more often then. He laughs now, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

Then his eyes meet mine. We gaze at each other across the circle of rays, Ursan between us. Unspoken words flow on a current. Silent communication each of us understands. *Something changed today.* It's new and fragile, but we both feel it.

Ursan's laughter joins the current, and then he's charging toward me with joy in his eyes. He reaches me in a rush of bubbles, grabbing my hand and pulling me across the circle. "You have to feel this, Ari! It's incredible!" He doesn't stop in the center. He barrels through it and captures Triton's hand. The stingrays part again, allowing us to return to the middle.

Millions of bubbles tickle my hair and face. Tease my ears and flow straight up my nose, making me sneeze and swat at the intruders. "Fucking — Get out of here!" More bubbles enter my nose mid-yell, turning my cursing into sputters.

Ursan laughs so hard he doubles over, one hand clutching his stomach.

"Hey!" I grumble, swiping bubbles from my nose. "Fuck you, too, all right? Your friends did this."

He laughs harder. Then Triton joins in, and the valley rings with laughter. The rays' bubbles *are* annoying, but I stop my fussing so I can enjoy the sound. As the bubbles tickle me all over and the two big males on either side of me grin at each other, I decide Ursan is right.

It feels incredible.

The stingrays end their play eventually, drifting off with silly smiles on their broad, flat faces.

Triton, Ursan, and I end up on the rock that overlooks the valley. We sit on the edge, Triton and I on either side of Ursan. His tentacles wave through the water, the tapered tips popping an errant bubble every so often.

Triton flicks his tail lazily as he points out various creatures that live among the red algae that lines the valley's walls.

"It's a beautiful color," Ursan says.

Triton smiles. "If you look closely, you'll see new coral growing underneath. The algae makes the reef strong." He stretches his long tail in front of him, setting the blue length glittering in the current. "And don't forget the seagrass. Not as flashy as the algae but just as important." His eyes gleam with pride as he gazes over the infant coral. "One day it'll be strong enough to build on. I could put a whole city down there."

"Will you?" Ursan asks.

The gleam in Triton's eyes dims. "No," he says softly. "I probably won't have time. This valley is too far from the clan's castle. I'd be away too often."

My chest tightens. Triton is happiest when he's building something. Rebuilding the clan isn't quite the same as raising a new spire or coaxing a getaway castle from the coral he loves to nurture.

Ursan stares at the valley for a long moment. Then he looks at Triton. "I could…help you. Maybe."

Triton turns his head. "You could. But coral can be difficult to work with. I'd have to teach you."

It's an innocent enough thing to say. There's no real reason for it to make my breath quicken. But it does. Something shifts—a subtle current swirling around the rock.

I'm not the only one who feels it. Pink creeps along Ursan's high cheekbones. In the water in front of us, one of his tentacles brushes Triton's tail, lingering just a little too long for the touch to be casual. I watch it slide over Triton's tailfin, remembering the way Ursan crowded me against the wall of his cave after we returned from the surface.

"Triton is a good teacher," I say. When Ursan swivels to look at me, I brace myself on my palms behind me and offer him a lazy smile. I match Triton's movements, sweeping my tail up and down in a languid arc. Brown eyes drift down my body and focus on my fan-shaped fin. Then they stray to Triton's.

I know the picture we make—two mermen perched on the rock, thick tails glittering in the bright lights of the anemone. My king and I are every cliche of our species at the moment. Every human sailor's fever dream come true. But as is often the case with fairy tales, every seemingly make-

believe story holds a kernel of truth. More than one ancient seaman spent the night in the arms of a smiling male with fins and a ready mouth.

Ursan's throat works as he swallows. One of his tentacles brushes Triton's tail again. Several of the suckers on the underside catch at Triton's scales before releasing with soft *pops*.

Triton groans low in his chest. His pouch bulges, his slit appearing among the brilliant blue scales.

Ursan's stare goes there—and stays. "How long would it take for me to learn?" he asks huskily.

Triton's reply is just as husky. "I think you could catch on quickly. You might be a natural."

His invitation is clear. But just in case it isn't, I push off the rock and dart to his other side. Eyes on Ursan, I sweep my hand down Triton's chest, caressing one plump pec before bumping down the hard ridges of his abs. I keep going, smoothing my hand from skin to scales as Triton's breathing grows heavy. When I reach his slit, he gives a needy-sounding grunt.

"He likes this," I tell Ursan, fingering the damp entrance to Triton's channel. I hold the slick lips open with my fingers, exposing my king's pink, glistening walls. "This is how you can tell." I use my free hand to stroke down one silky fold…then the other. "See how wet he is?"

Ursan's breath hitches. "I see it."

Triton moans and sinks down so he's propped on his elbows. He tips his head back and shudders. I spread my fingers wider, and his cock bursts from his channel, the bulbous tip glossy with precum.

"Gods," Ursan whispers, his gaze riveted. The sea could dry up, and I doubt he'd notice. His tentacles move agitatedly in the water, the tips swirling over Triton's tail. Suckers latch on and pop off only to return and repeat the motion. One snakes up the shimmering blue scales and curls around Triton's hip.

"Yes," my king murmurs, rolling his head so he's staring at Ursan with heavy-lidded eyes. "Touch me. Anywhere you want."

Ursan looks like he's just been given the keys to paradise and can't decide where to explore first. Emotions parade through his eyes—lust, excitement, doubt. He reaches out with a shaking hand.

I capture it and draw it forward. "Where do you want to touch him?" I move his fingers to Triton's slit. "Here"—I stroke Ursan's fingertips down Triton's wet, flaring lips—"or here?" I draw them to Triton's bobbing cock.

A tentacle crawls around my wrist. Suckers tug my skin gently, sending desire spiraling through me and making me bite back a moan.

"Everywhere," Ursan says, his tentacle winding around Triton's dick as his fingers return to Triton's slit.

"Fuck," Triton breathes, undulating his hips. The movement ripples through his tail, which sends a wake shivering through the water. His big chest heaves, and he keeps his eyes locked with Ursan's as Ursan fingers his channel and strokes his cock.

My dick throbs in my pouch as I watch Triton shudder under Ursan's ministrations. Triton was right—Ursan is a fast learner. Something fierce and possessive glints in his dark eyes as he works Triton over, pumping his dick and exploring his slit. Triton lies passively, ceding control. His submission is a form of apology that swells my heart.

But it also swells my cock. We've taken other lovers into our bed. Countless times through the years, we've shared other males and watched each other take pleasure. But this is different. Ursan isn't a temporary diversion. This is something deeper. I'm not sure what it looks like yet, but it's not casual or fleeting.

Another tentacle climbs up Triton's tail, winding around and around as it ascends. A third moves to one of Triton's pebbled nipples and latches on.

"Ahh!" my king shouts, his entire body spasming.

Ursan's dark eyes lock with Triton's. "I want to fuck you," he rasps.

Triton's nod of assent is instant. "Yes. Please."

"Help me, Ari," Ursan says, and I jerk as the command sizzles over my skin. He doesn't need the help. He's doing just fine on his own. No, he *wants* it. I'm not sure he realizes it, but he wants both Triton and me to bend.

When I hesitate a moment too long, he pins me with a hot stare. "Now," he says, his voice quiet and all the more devastating for it.

Groaning, I grasp the nearest tentacle and position the pointed tip at Triton's slit. My king grunts and rocks his hips, offering his body. I push Ursan's tentacle into Triton's channel as another tentacle continues stroking Triton's cock.

"Fuck," I breathe, looking from Ursan's parted lips and blown pupils to Triton's channel swallowing the tentacle. My heart races as I stroke over the slick, muscular appendage and into Triton's opening. His walls spasm against my fingers as I withdraw. I work my fingers over the place where

their bodies join, smearing Triton's sticky lubrication over Ursan's smooth tentacle. "Feel that?"

Ursan nods. "He's tight. Dripping wet."

Triton groans, his head tipping farther back. "Please," he pants, thrusting to meet the tentacle, each lift of his hips sucking Ursan's tentacle deeper inside him.

"What do you want?" Ursan demands.

Triton lifts his head, his blue eyes two burning slits. "You," he gasps.

"Not good enough," Ursan says, and I almost swallow my tongue as he parrots my words from the rooftop of the Aerie. Damn, the kid stole my line. If I wasn't ready to flip over and hump the rock, I might laugh out loud.

Triton's eyes go wide, and I revel in the novel experience of seeing my unflappable king momentarily speechless. "Fuck me," he grunts, hips working. His gaze dips to Triton's tentacle wrapped around his cock. "I want your dick inside me."

"Are you wet enough for me?" Ursan murmurs, and his tentacle in Triton's channel sinks deeper.

Gods above. I curse and palm my bulging pouch. In a blink, a tentacle whips around my waist and jerks me off the shelf. As I dangle helplessly, Ursan shoves Triton backward so he's flat on the rock. He yanks me into his side and settles over Triton, his remaining tentacles splayed on the rock.

My head is still spinning as Ursan looks at me over his shoulder. "I'm not leaving you out, Ari." A tentacle shoots up my tail and probes my slit.

"Fuck!" I shout, arousal flaring so hot and fast I almost come on the spot. Just how many fucking tentacles does he have? I've lost count, and I suddenly don't care as one wriggles into my pouch, stretching me wide. Cool water floods my channel, and then Ursan tugs my dick into the open. Suckers latch onto my shaft and pulse, sucking at my swollen flesh.

My whole body stiffens. A shaky, high-pitched whimper emerges from me. It's a weak sound, and I should probably be embarrassed about it, but I'm too far gone to care. I make it again as white-hot pleasure shoots through me and my eyes roll back in my head. I'm losing my mind.

Triton groans loudly, and I cling to the last threads of my control so I can watch what's happening. Because no way am I missing this. Panting at the suction massaging my cock, I clench my fists and stare as Ursan's big dick falls from his pouch.

He's enormous in this form, his shaft as round as a human baseball bat. His tentacle continues working Triton's dick as he lines himself up with Triton's slit. I can't breathe. Can only dangle in Ursan's grasp, my own hips thrusting helplessly as he pushes past Triton's lips.

Triton groans. Finally, his arms give out and he flops onto his back on the rock. His mouth goes slack, his sapphire eyes sheened with lust as he writhes under Ursan.

The tentacle around my waist squeezes tighter. The one wrapped around my dick works faster. Sucks harder. This isn't going to last long. Heat flares under my skin, my blood turning to lava in my veins.

Ursan plants a big hand on the rock next to Triton's shoulder and sinks forward until his hips are flush with Triton's. My king's dick is trapped between them, the hard length pressed flat against Triton's stomach while Ursan fills his channel.

"How's that feel?" Ursan rasps, his dark hair waving around his head. The tentacle on Triton's nipple pops off and moves to Triton's other pec. The nipple it just attended puckers lewdly, the tight bud swollen and darkened to a red that matches the algae around us.

Triton reaches up and rubs a hand down Ursan's tatted arm. "Fuck me. Please. I can't wait."

Ursan leans down and kisses him, his strong jaw working as he takes Triton's mouth in a possessive kiss. My vision fills with dark stubble and flashes of pink tongue. The tentacle around my dick pumps faster, milking precum from the slit in my cockhead. *Fuck.* This can't get any hotter.

Ursan begins to thrust, his powerful hips rolling in a slow grind. His cock pumps into Triton's channel, the shaft shiny with moisture every time he withdraws.

Okay, yeah, it can get hotter.

Both males groan as they continue their searing kiss. Ursan quickens his thrusts. As his hips pump harder, the tentacle around my cock keeps pace. He jerks me as he fucks Triton, pulling wild, needy sounds from us both.

After a minute, Ursan begins to fuck Triton in earnest. He snaps his hips, plunging his cock into Triton's channel. His movements grow less coordinated, and he breaks off the kiss and stares down at my king with a look so dominant and possessive my toes would curl were I in human form.

He pounds Triton, his thrusts nailing Triton to the rock. My king bows his spine and cries out, Ursan's punishing thrusts rocking his whole body.

The tentacle around my waist locks me to Ursan's side, and now I'm riding every thrust as the other tentacle jerks me ruthlessly. Ursan plunges into Triton so hard, Triton's body jerks and slides up the rock. Ursan reaches between their bodies and captures Triton's dick.

"Come for me," Ursan grits out, hips pumping with brutal force. His tentacle strangles my dick. "Both of you come for me now."

I trip over the edge, my orgasm ripping from me so violently it's like a wound. It tears me open and leaves me twisting and unmoored. I spurt hot and fast, covering Ursan's tentacle in milky white seed.

Ursan pumps a final time and roars, the tendons in his neck popping as he unloads deep inside Triton's channel. A second later, Triton's mouth opens on a silent bellow as he shudders through his own orgasm.

Water whips around us. Spots dance in my vision. Pleasure beats me like waves against the shore, dragging me back and forth as ecstasy explodes, then builds and explodes a second time. When it finally recedes, Ursan's tentacle releases my dick. The one around my waist loosens, and I end up face down on the rock with my cheek pressed to the cool stone.

I'm not sure how long I stay like that, but eventually I become aware of Triton breathing heavily beside me. When I work up the strength, I roll onto my back as Ursan flops down on Triton's other side.

We stay like that, boneless and sated. Currents lap at us, carrying away sweat and seed. No words pass between us. No vows or formal declarations are spoken. But change flows around us. Something is different. Everything is different. I can't pinpoint the moment it happened. Maybe it's been a series of moments, starting with a pair of chocolate-brown eyes holding mine across a sandy yard full of useless surface junk. Or maybe it started with those same eyes staring at my reflection in a mirror on a shipwreck.

"I like it, Ari. The scar."

So does Triton.

As I turn my head and meet my king's blue gaze, I'm certain of one thing only. We can go back to the clan and the castle. But we can never go back to the way things were before.

Chapter 13

Ari

When we return to the island, Triton announces we'll stay for two days. But then two days become three, and then three days stretch into a week.

Triton doesn't test Ursan again. But he does a whole lot of teaching. We both do, spending our days lazing in the sun on the beach and our nights tangled in the big bed in Triton's room. We teach the sea witch about pleasure. How to spool it out and prolong it. How to flip it onto the sharp edge that borders on pain. How to receive it without shame or reservation. How to share it.

To my surprise, Ursan teaches us a few things, too. On our third night, he drags us down to the water's edge and tells us to stay bipedal while he shifts into his Myth form. Rising from the shallow water, he orders us to our hands and knees before him, heads down and asses high. Side by side on the damp beach, he spreads us wide and stuffs our holes while his other tentacles massage our balls and tug at our dicks.

"It's a race," he says. "But this is one you want to lose."

"Why?" Triton grunts, panting as the wet sounds of Ursan's tentacles thrusting into our holes fill the night air.

"Because whichever one of you naughty boys comes first is going to suck my dick."

I lose—and I end up with a mouthful of sea witch and Triton's wicked tongue in my ass. Later, I pull Ursan close to me in bed and smile against his lips.

"You were wrong, you know," I murmur.

His eyes dance with heat and curiosity as he faces me on the pillows. "About what?"

I squeeze his ass and grind my hardening dick against his. "I won that race on the beach tonight."

His lips curve, his dimple appearing. Then his eyes soften. "You were wrong, too."

“About what?” I say with a cocky smile, tossing his words back at him.

He rests his forehead against mine. “You said you don’t have any magic. But you feel pretty magical to me.”

I fall asleep in his arms, Triton a warm, solid weight at my back.

I wake sometime later with my throbbing dick lodged in Ursan’s cleft. He thrusts his ass backward, grinding his hole over my shaft.

Instantly awake, I suck in a sharp breath as I seize his hip. “You have to stop that,” I croak.

He meets my gaze over his shoulder. “Why? I want it.”

Lust sears my veins. Moisture dribbles from my cockhead as my hips roll without my permission. On Ursan’s other side, Triton turns over and regards us with sleepy blue eyes. The bedroom is dark except for moonlight streaming through the window. Outside, the waves crash against the beach. A breeze drifts over the bed, cooling my heated skin.

But it doesn’t cool my blood. I squeeze Ursan’s hip. “Are you sure?” We haven’t done this. Triton and I have both fucked Ursan’s channel, but we haven’t taken his ass. For some reason, it feels like a big step. Momentous in a way I can’t articulate.

“I want it,” he rasps, bringing his mouth to mine. He tugs at my bottom lip with his teeth. “I want your dick inside me.”

For a second, I think I’ll come before we get started. Centuries of living, and I’m ready to lose it with a sea witch with one week of sexual experience under his belt. But he’s not just any sea witch. He’s *Ursan*.

I slide my palm up his ribs, smoothing over his tattoos and finding a flat nipple. I pinch lightly, pulling a groan from him. “That’s good,” I murmur against his lips, “because I *really* want my dick in your ass.”

Triton slips from the bed. He returns within seconds and presses a bottle of lube into my hand. I coat my fingers, then touch Ursan’s topmost knee. “Lift this leg for me.”

He complies, spreading himself and giving me access to the dark furrow of his ass. Triton lies on his side facing Ursan. As I tease slick fingertips over Ursan’s hole, Triton grasps Ursan’s rigid dick and strokes him.

“Oh,” Ursan gasps, his whole body jerking. “Oh…gods.”

A lazy smile gleams in Triton’s eyes as he leans in and captures Ursan’s lips. Their kiss is slow and passionate, their firm jaws fitting

seamlessly together. Triton's arm moves between them, his big fist slowly working Ursan's dick.

"That's a good boy," I whisper, running my hand up Ursan's thick thigh. Goosebumps pebble his skin as I pull his knee higher, opening him wide. I return to his hole, stroking the fluttering opening. "Good boy. Open for me." I push the tip of my finger inside. "There you go."

He whimpers, his muscles clenching around me. He's so hot and tight. A searing forge I can't wait to sink into. Blood pumps so hard to my cock, I feel lightheaded. I bury my face in the soft hair at Ursan's nape and touch the tip of my tongue to his salty-sweet skin. The three of us move together, rocking gently as I probe Ursan's ass and Triton strokes his dick.

Eventually, Triton and Ursan break off their kiss. Ursan tips his head back, and I suck at the side of his neck as I push my whole finger inside him.

He melts, moans falling in a continuous stream from his lips. "Please, Ari," he begs. "Please fuck me. Fuck my ass."

I add another finger and pump gently, the slick sound making my balls draw up tight. "You want a big dick in this hole, good boy?"

"Yes," he rasps, jerking his hips. He pulls his knee higher as he fucks my finger. "Yes, I want it."

He's ready, but I finger him for another moment. I want this to be perfect for him. I want to blow his mind.

When his moans drown out the sound of the waves on the shore, I pull my fingers from his ass. Triton stops stroking Ursan's dick as I grasp Ursan's chin and force his gaze to mine. His pupils are blown, his eyes bleary with need.

"You ready for me?"

He gives a jerky nod as his hips writhe between Triton and me. "Yes. *So* ready. Fuck me, Ari."

I brush my lips over his, then grip my cock and line up. He's open and ready, and I slide in easy as anything, pushing past the ring of muscle until my hips nestle against his firm cheeks.

"Good boy," Triton praises, rubbing a big hand over Ursan's chest. As Ursan shudders, Triton strokes down to Ursan's leaking dick…and then keeps going, cupping his heavy balls before running a finger around Ursan's taut rim. "One day, Ari and I can both fuck you here."

Ursan's groan rumbles the whole bed.

I give him an experimental thrust—and nearly combust when his ass ripples around my dick. “You like the sound of that?” I ask, rocking my hips forward. “You want two big cocks stuffing this tight hole?”

“Fuck,” he moans, eyes rolling back in his head.

I chuckle. “We’ll revisit that.” I keep fucking him, thrusting and trying not to lose control. But he feels so damn good, it’s no time at all before my orgasm hovers.

Then Triton reaches across Ursan and grips my thigh. “I want your ass.”

It’s not a good idea. This is Ursan’s first time. Before I can protest, Ursan pops his eyes open and gives me a look so searing I feel it in my pores. He and Triton are apparently on the same page, because Ursan nods and says, “Fuck yes. I want that, too.”

It takes about half a second for me to give in. “All right,” I murmur. “If that’s what you want.”

We rearrange ourselves, climbing over each other and grunting when elbows end up in tender places. Finally, Ursan is flat on his back with me looming over him and Triton on his knees behind me. I push Ursan’s knees to his chest and take a moment to admire his slick, clenching hole. When I slide back inside him, it’s even better than the first time. His ass swallows my dick and clamps down tight, ripping a moan from my throat.

I moan again when Triton spreads my cheeks and starts working my hole with a lubed finger. He opens me with practiced strokes, pumping in and out until I’m thrusting back to meet him. Ursan moans beneath me as my movements drive my cock deeper inside him.

“Now,” I pant, glancing at Triton over my shoulder. “Get inside me.”

“Impatient,” he says, but the tremor in his deep voice tells me he’s barely clinging to his control. The lube cap clicks, and there’s a pause as he slicks himself. Then his damp cockhead probes my hole.

I stop thrusting into Ursan as Triton pushes inside. The burn is minimal. And anyway, I want it. I want the fire that dissolves into a thick, liquid wave of pleasure as Triton’s dick fills my ass. When his balls nudge my cheeks and push my cock deeper inside Ursan, all three of us groan.

“Fuck,” I mutter, bracing myself on my palms on either side of Ursan’s head. My necklaces dangle between us, shells and beads brushing his inked pecs. In a fast move, he tangles a hand in the strands and yanks my head down. He swallows my gasp as he claims my mouth in a scorching

kiss, his tongue stroking boldly over mine. At the same time, he lifts his hips, urging my shaft deeper into his hole.

Triton begins to move, giving me slow, steady thrusts. He grasps my hips, then delivers a sharp blow to one cheek. I grunt into Ursan's mouth—then grunt some more when Ursan winds my necklaces around his fist, locking my lips to his. He tops me from the bottom, holding me still while he plunders my mouth and works his hips faster.

Triton matches his pace, every thrust pushing me harder and faster into Ursan's ass. Sweat trickles down my temple. Triton's fingers dig into my hips as he pumps harder. His thrusts grow less coordinated, forcing Ursan and me to break off our kiss. Instead, we stare at each other, our breath mingling as we race toward release.

Ursan's dark eyes shimmer with moonlight as he stares up at me. His chest heaves as we rock together, groans falling from our open mouths.

"Stroke yourself," I order. "I want your cum all over me."

It's the right thing to say, because he inhales sharply and fumbles for his dick between us. Half a dozen strokes and he's coming, the tendons in his neck pulling taut as he throws his head back and shoots all over his hand and my stomach.

The sight sends me straight over the edge. My orgasm slams into me so hard I collapse to my forearms as I pump hot cum into his hole. Triton shouts and fucks me harder, his hips slapping against my ass. After a few more punishing thrusts, he stiffens, pulls from my hole, and spurts across my back. His warm seed lashes my spine in thick ropes, making me shudder as Ursan's tight ass milks the last of my cum.

Sweaty and exhausted, we land in a heap with our legs tangled together. The three of us kiss for a while, lips and tongues meeting and parting and meeting again. Eventually, I cup Ursan's stubble-shadowed jaw and rub my thumb over his high cheekbone.

"You okay?"

"Oh yeah," he says throatily. His eyelids droop.

A smile pulls at my lips. "We should probably get some sleep."

"Mmhmm." He loses the battle to keep his eyes open. Seconds later, his lips part and a soft snore emerges.

My smile spreads through my chest. "Goodnight, Ursan," I say, dropping a kiss on his forehead. Triton spoons me from behind, and I drift to sleep sandwiched between his and Ursan's warm bodies.

Like all good things, the week can't last forever. Bastian is capable of watching over the syndicate, but it's only a matter of time before he gets irritated enough at our absence to come looking for us, and I'm not sure I'm ready for him to meet Ursan.

But most pressing is the need to subdue the leviathans. It's been a few days since Triton spelled them and it needs doing.

"I could come with you," Ursan says, his dark eyes hopeful as he looks between Triton and me. The three of us stand in the garden under the late evening sun. Humans call it the golden hour—something about the lighting being perfect for cameras. Some of that old tech still works, and they make images that last forever. I wish I could use one now so I could capture Ursan and Triton together this way, their tan skin gleaming in the sun with Ursan's flowers behind them.

"No," I say gently. "It's better if you stay here for now." Triton and I rehearsed this. Last night after Ursan fell asleep, we came up with all the reasons why he needs to remain on the island. "Triton will be busy catching up with his duties at court. You wouldn't even see him."

"But I'd see you," Ursan argues, a line appearing between his brows.

"Ari has obligations at court, too," Triton says. He gestures to the garden. "And you need to practice using your power. Strong emotion can make you lose control. The best way to learn restraint is to work without distractions."

It's clear Ursan wants to argue, but he eventually nods. "When will you be back?"

"A day or two," I say.

"As soon as we can," Triton says at the same time.

So we didn't rehearse everything.

In the end, we promise to return in two days. Ursan accepts this, but it's harder to leave than I expected. He stands on the beach as we enter the water and shift, and his melancholy eyes are the last thing I see before I dive into the current that speeds Triton and me out to sea.

We're quiet as we make our way back to the castle, neither of us willing to discuss the implications of the past week. But that reckoning is coming. The seashell pendant hangs around Triton's neck. And maybe it's

just my imagination, but I swear I can see its weight resettling over him as we exit the underwater highway and enter clan territory.

I expect Bastian to greet us at the castle. Instead, the school of sea nymphs darts out from the shadow of the big double doors as Triton and I ascend the castle steps.

Dash swims forward, his gaze searching behind us like he's looking for something.

"Ursan is fine," Triton says, reading the little male's expression.

The school shivers, tiny heads swiveling toward each other. "Where did you put him?" a voice pipes up from the rear of the crowd.

Dash looks over his shoulder like he means to quiet them, but the questions keep coming.

"Where is he?"

"Did you hurt him?"

"Why isn't he with you?"

"You promised you wouldn't harm him!"

Triton bends to the nymphs' level. His eyes are kind but serious as he says, "And I didn't. Ursan is alive and well. He stayed behind on the island to practice his gift."

Dozens of pairs of big, round eyes seem to take this in, weighing the veracity of Triton's words. After a second of silence, a fresh round of questions and accusations rise from the group. Triton sighs and makes shushing motions with his hands.

"I just told you…" he begins, but his deep voice is drowned out by the nymphs' higher-pitched grievances. I should probably intervene. I could scatter the nymphs with one well-timed roar. But the sight of Triton swarmed by furious sea nymphs is too good to pass up. I've seen him take down a giant squid with a single punch. Watching him besieged by a miniature army is exactly the sort of comedic relief I need after swimming away from Ursan's downcast face.

Dash's gaze moves to me. As it lingers, my amusement fades. He peers at my face, his stare so penetrating I fight the urge to squirm. Which is ridiculous because sea nymphs are about as intimidating as seal pups.

Finally, I scowl at him. "What's your problem?" I expect him to cower. As far as scowls go, mine is pretty effective. But the nymph leader doesn't flinch or dart away. He just continues his assessing look. Then he nods to himself and turns to the group of nymphs.

“Everything is all right. Ursan is safe.”

The nymphs’ complaints cut off. As one, their gazes swing to me. More penetrating stares and then a shiver ripples through the school. Abruptly, they spin and swim away. Dash gives me a final nod and then follows.

“Wait!”

He pauses, tail swishing as he looks over his shoulder.

I gesture to the retreating school. “What happened? What changed their minds?”

“You, Ari Razorfin.”

I glance at Triton, who looks as confused as I feel. “Me?”

Dash bobs his head. “We know Ursan will be all right. The boy found his voice. And you found your heart.” Big eyes blink once, and then he spins and moves after the school.

“Hold, nymph,” Triton says suddenly. When Dash stops again, Triton rumbles, “What about me?” He lowers his voice. “What did I find?”

The sea nymph leader hesitates. “I can’t say, my king. Perhaps you’re still looking for it.” Dash bows, spins, and streaks after his school, his long tail cutting a sharp wake through the water.

His words play through my head as I watch him go. Found my heart? More like enjoyed a week of fucking without worrying about anyone trying to kill me. I turn to say as much to Triton, but the words die on my lips when I see his face.

He frowns as the nymphs disappear from view, his expression arrested like he’s been dealt a blow.

I go to him and put a hand on his stomach. “Hey. Forget that cryptic bullshit.” Suddenly, it occurs to me that maybe Triton thinks the nymphs will blab about Ursan to the rest of the court. “You want me to go after them?”

Triton turns a startled gaze to mine. “What? Why?”

“I’ll make sure they don’t talk.”

He draws back slightly, something like distaste in his eyes. “You’re not going to rough up a bunch of sea nymphs, Ari.”

For some reason, heat flares in my face. Does he really think I would do that? Apparently, since he just fucking said it. I drop my hand from his stomach. “I didn’t mean it that way. I would just talk to them.”

Triton shakes his head. “Unnecessary. They kept our secrets for twenty years. They’re not going to talk now.” He turns and heads up the steps. “Come on,” he sighs. “Let’s see what disasters unfolded in our absence.”

I trail after him, braced for a distressed Bastian to rush us as soon as we step through the doors. But the large foyer is quiet and deserted. The calm continues all the way to the throne room, where Liveil greets us with an easy smile on his handsome face.

“It’s good to see you again, my king,” he says, offering Triton a respectful bow. He offers me a smile—and a lazy perusal of my torso. His gaze snags on a bite mark over my ribs, and his smile tilts into a smirk. “Looks like you enjoyed your time away.”

I fold my arms to hide Ursan’s bite.

“Did any business arise in our absence?” Triton asks, “business” being his way of saying “insurgencies.” My king loves his euphemisms.

Liveil recognizes Triton is in no mood for banter, and his expression goes instantly serious. “No, my lord. It’s been a quiet week.”

Bastian’s voice drifts into the throne room from the archway that leads to the Great Hall. “...and I’ll want a full accounting of every dinner plate. This castle could use more place settings.”

Liveil looks toward the archway. As Bastian’s voice fades, he turns back to Triton. “I’ll let Bastian know you’ve returned, my king.”

“No,” Triton says quickly. “I’ll go to him myself. Thank you for your assistance this week, Liveil. Take a couple days off to enjoy yourself.”

Liveil grins, and I can almost see the plans forming in his blond head. “Any time, my king.” He winks at me. “Later, Ari.” He rushes off, tailfin pumping.

I tuck my chin and examine the mark on my ribs. When I lift my head, Triton is watching me, his frown still firmly in place. “It’ll fade,” I say. “And if anyone notices, they’ll assume it’s from you.”

“I’m not worried about it.”

Then why do you look worried? I press my lips together before the words can spill out. Neither of us is happy to be back at the castle right now, but he’s been a grump since we arrived in clan territory.

Bastian’s voice drifts from the archway again, and Triton and I both tense. When it grows fainter, I release a relieved breath.

“We’re not going to be able to keep Ursan hidden away forever,” I warn Triton.

His brows pull more tightly together. “When did I say we were?”

“You didn’t.” Irritation sparks at his testiness, which I’ve done nothing to deserve. “You haven’t said anything about the future.”

“It’s been a week, Ari.” Triton gives me the look he uses when he thinks I’m not grasping some intricate political intrigue. “Bringing Ursan to court will raise a lot of questions, including questions from him. He’s safe on the island for now.”

My irritation flares into anger. “And you think he won’t ask questions if we keep him on the island? He’s far too perceptive for that. And now that he’s out of his cave, he’s changing fast. Take it from me, he’s not going to enjoy feeling like our dirty secret.”

Triton moves closer and narrows his eyes. “Take it from you? What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve never been my secret.”

I huff a humorless laugh. “But I *am* dirty, right?” I glance around the throne room. “Too dirty for this place, at least.”

“That’s what *you* think,” he says in a low, angry voice. “You know damn well I’ve never thought that.”

“Plenty of other people think it.”

“Who cares what they think?” He jabs a finger into his chest. “You should care what *I* think, and I’ve told you a thousand times that I don’t care where you come from.” Blue eyes glitter with anger and frustration. “When will you start listening?”

I clamp my jaw shut. We glare at each other for a long moment before he moves backward.

“I have to see to the leviathans.” He turns toward the archway.

“I’ll come with you,” I say.

He swings back and puts out a staying hand. “No. I can handle it.”

“Like you handled it last time?” His nostrils flare at my needling tone, but I can’t stop. Not when he’s being so willfully blind about Ursan. “Lucius du Sang said no more than three drops of blood. I know you’ve been using more.”

“Keep your voice down,” he hisses, glancing at the archway. The frustration flees his gaze, leaving only anger. “Stay here. I don’t need a nursemaid.”

“Are you sure?” I fire back, abandoning all pretense of discussion. We’re arguing now, and it’s his fucking fault. “You guzzle siren blood like

it's mead. You continue putting yourself in danger like you did with the sharkmen, running off to confront Brek without me."

In a blink, Triton is in my face, his eyes darkened to midnight blue. "Did it ever occur to you that I spare you these things? I killed Brek so *you* didn't have to. I go to the vault alone because you hate being down there."

"I don't hate it—"

"Oh yes you fucking do," he snarls. His tone turns nasty. "You cling to your inferiority complex like it's a lifeline."

I bare my fangs. "Inferiority complex? For someone who hates the surface, you sure do love parroting human phrases." I make a face. "Oh, sorry, I should probably explain what a parrot is, you being an important ocean type and all. Big, colorful bird that—"

"That's right, Ari," he says, chest bumping mine. "Make a joke. Brush it off instead of admitting the truth. You can't acknowledge that I'm right. You'll just continue clinging to your past because it's easier than accepting that someone might love you. And you know why? Because you are fucking *terrified* to face that reality. Because then you might actually have to love someone back."

"What bullshit is this? I've said I love you." I flip several of his necklaces up. "You're the one who won't give me your fucking pearl."

"Yeah, well, you haven't offered, either."

I flip his necklaces again. "That's a fucking lame excuse."

He seizes my wrist in a hard grip. "Watch it."

"Or what? You'll pull rank on me?" I tug at my wrist, my blood boiling when I realize I can't break his hold. "Apologies, my king," I sneer. "I beg the royal forgiveness."

He shoves me away. "Go," he orders, pointing toward the other side of the room.

"Where?" I ask, my voice just below a shout. "To polish your boots, maybe?" I smack my forehead. "Another human expression. That means—"

"Shut up," he barks. His shoulders tremble with obvious rage. "I don't care where you go, but I don't want to look at you right now. Go to the surface. Run away to your rock the way you do any time things get hard."

I freeze. My mind blanks and my heart stops. Just ceases beating in my chest as I face him across the short distance. Such a small space but it might as well be a million miles.

He freezes, too, his face a mask of shock. It's like a bomb detonated, and we're both just waiting for the fallout.

Finally, I find my voice. "I have loved you from the very beginning," I say quietly. "I've never shied away from that. Never. I've fought by your side. Slept at your side. Stood by your side. There's never been anywhere else I wanted to be." I draw a deep breath. "Even when you order me away from you, I'd rather be by your side."

His face crumples. "Ari…"

I swallow the embarrassing lump in my throat. Somehow, I pump my tailfin and turn. I'm halfway to the door when he grabs my shoulder and pulls me around.

"Ari," he rasps, tugging me against him. He wraps his big arms around me and buries his face in my neck. "Forgive me."

I stay stiff in his arms, my gaze on the throne he rebuilt after Crallek died. Sometimes I can still see Crallek's blood billowing down the steps.

"Ari," Triton says again, pulling back and cupping my face in his hands. "I'm sorry." His blue eyes glitter with tears. "I love you. I didn't mean what I said. You're right. You've always been there for me. You've helped me bear the weight of the syndicate and Crallek's voice for twenty years." He strokes his thumbs over my cheekbones. "I love you. I'm sorry, my love. I'm an idiot."

Amusement tugs at my lips despite my best effort to stifle it. "Well," I murmur, "that's true."

He gives me a sad smile. Then he reaches down and grasps his green mating pearl. He holds it between his thumb and forefinger between us. "This has always belonged to you. I just wanted to do it right." He looks down, his brow furrowing. "I want a big celebration. But we're always fighting for our lives. We solve one problem and five more appear."

I capture strands of his hair that float around his shoulders. The pale ends wrap around my wrist, and I give them a gentle tug. "That's why I think we need to decide how we're going to handle Ursan. Sooner rather than later. His gift is an asset, but…"

Triton looks up. "But you think *he's* an asset, too."

I search the gaze of the male I've loved since before the Veil fell. "Do you feel the same way?"

His throat bobs as he swallows. "I think things might be heading in that direction. But…I worry."

“About the syndicate?”

“About us.”

I move my hands to his waist. Our hips nudge each other, our pouches rubbing gently. “You and I aren’t strangers to having others in our bed, my king.”

“I know. But Ursan isn’t a fling. Or even a regular. If we do this, I think it has to be a forever kind of thing.”

A forever kind of thing.

I look from Triton’s mating pearl to the seashell pendant nestled among his necklaces. If we took on Ursan as a third—as a partner—Triton would never have to bear Crallek’s power again.

But is that the right reason to ask Ursan to join us? And if he ever discovers the truth about his father, will he question the affection Triton and I feel for him?

“You found your heart,” Dash said. But he’s a sea nymph. Even if I wanted to read into his nonsense, he’s barely seen me with Ursan.

Triton brushes a thumb over my upper lip, tracing the scar he admires so much. “This isn’t something we have to decide right now. Let me spell the leviathans. We’ll return to the island tomorrow and spend more time with Ursan.”

My heart leaps at the idea of returning so soon. Just as quickly, my heart sinks to my tailfin. “Bastian won’t like it.”

“He’s my advisor, not my keeper.”

I offer Triton a rueful smile. “I wouldn’t recommend telling him that.”

Triton tugs me close and kisses me, cementing his apology with his lips and tongue. When he draws back, he looks tired. “I’ll take care of the leviathans. Then I’ll talk to Bastian. Then I want to take you to bed.”

“I have no objections. Big fan of the last part.”

He gives me another quick kiss, then swims for the archway.

“Triton?”

He turns, gray-and-white hair waving around his shoulders. “Yes?”

“Three drops, all right? No more.”

He nods. Then he leaves, carrying the seashell pendant and Crallek’s voice with him. But as he swims away, I feel its weight around my neck.

Chapter 14

Triton

Ari was right. Bastian didn't like it when I announced Ari and I were only home for one night.

The sounds of my advisor's shouted complaints and clacking claws ring in my ears as I keep pace with Ari in the current that speeds us toward the island. I let Bastian rant last night. I heard him out, and I considered all his arguments. That's what a good king should do. What a responsible syndicate lord does. I try not to make decisions without examining all the angles.

But in this instance, I can't find any angles that point to Ursan being a bad idea. Yes, it's only been a week. And yes, I worry about upsetting the balance between Ari and me. On the other hand, it's been a long time since I saw Ari as happy as he's been over the past seven days. And it's not just sex. It's Ursan. He's…innocent—and not only because he's inexperienced. There's a purity to him that's intrinsic. That wholesome, noble quality is just part of who he is. He's sweet but it's not cloying or saccharine. It's just him. I felt it in the brief flash of peace he bestowed upon me. For that one moment, I was free, not an ounce of weight on my shoulders. Just peace.

And gods help me but I want more of it.

Ari is just as smitten. Hell, even the stingrays sensed it. I can't say for certain how the future is going to unfold, but I believe Ursan has to be in it. I know Ari agrees with me. That's as good of a start as any.

We jump from the swift-moving underwater highway and into the slower current. Ari looks at me and flicks his tail, sending a wake bumping into my side.

I grin and hit him back, bumping him out of the current and making him laugh. We keep it up, acting like a couple of idiots all the way to the island.

The afternoon sun sets the beach glittering like gemstones as we rise from the sea and shift. Seconds later, the castle's double doors open and

Ursan emerges bare-chested with a pair of loose black pants slung low on his hips.

His grin stretches from ear to ear, his white teeth flashing as he jogs down the steps and moves quickly to the beach.

"You weren't supposed to come back until tomorrow!"

Grinning, Ari smooths water from his hair and strides toward him. "Change of plans." He jerks his thumb at me over his shoulder. "The big guy couldn't stay away."

I shake my head, but I can't hide my smile. And I don't want to, I realize. Better yet, I don't *have* to. In this place, with these two males, I don't have to hide. For the next few days, we can do anything we want. No one is going to disturb us.

Ursan grins at me. Then his grin drops, and he stumbles to a halt.

I stop too. "What—?"

"Hello, Sea Lord," a melodious voice says behind me.

I whip around, every muscle instantly taut.

Renna, queen of the largest siren clan in the ocean, steps onto shore, a wicked smile curving her full lips. Behind her, dozens of sirens pull themselves up gracefully from the water. Long, dark tails split into slender, muscled legs. Water sluices down sleek limbs and long, flowing hair that clings to softly rounded shoulders and full, bare breasts. Like all the Folk, the sirens are unbothered by nudity. They stand proudly, shoulders thrown back and eyes glittering with danger. Dozens of necklaces hang around their necks and descend to trim, flat stomachs. Fangs peek between red and pink lips. Claws curl around spears tipped with poison that shines black and oily in the sun.

Renna carries a trident similar to mine. Like me, she uses hers to focus her power. And I'm a stupid, careless asshole to have left mine behind.

My heart pounds, tendrils of panic spreading through me. There's only one reason for Renna's presence on the island. She's here for blood. *Hers.* And Ursan absolutely *cannot* know I use siren blood to mimic his power. With a few choice words, Renna could upend everything. Expose the deception Ari and I have danced around every time we interact with Ursan. Somehow, I've got to end this conversation before it begins—and without pissing off a female who has every right to want me dead.

"Renna," I say, widening my stance. "To what do I owe this honor?"

Pale green eyes take my measure. The siren queen thrusts the staff of her trident into the sand and props a hand on her hip. She's all lush curves and long, dark hair braided with beads and shells. Females have never appealed to me, but I can admit that Renna is gorgeous.

Throughout the centuries, plenty of unfortunate souls have shared that assessment. Before the Veil fell, Renna wore necklaces of human teeth around her pretty neck. Sailors from Europe to the Horn of Africa sang cautionary tales of the dark-haired siren who sang to ships becalmed in the sea.

Renna's smile stays in place but it doesn't reach her eyes. "You have stolen from me, Triton. I'm here to recover my property."

Despite the bright yellow sun in the sky, a chill snakes down my spine. "You're mistaken. I've taken nothing."

Her gaze moves to Ari frozen beside me. "Your second then," she murmurs. "I should have known."

"Ari didn't steal from you," I say. "You have no complaint with us. Now go. This is my land. Your trespass is unwarranted."

She bares her fangs and hisses. Behind her, several sirens do the same. Others make a rattling sound in their throats. One begins to sing, her voice lifting over the water in a sweet chorus that circles my chest and threatens to tug me forward.

I grit my teeth and focus on the slap of the waves against the sand. One siren song is unlikely to lure me. This one is a warning. If Renna wishes to play dirty, she'll set her whole clan singing. And then Ari and I will have a true fight on our hands.

Renna glares at me. "You've always been a hypocrite." Keeping her eyes on me, she extends a claw toward Ari. "This one carries my people's blood in the starfish pendant he wears." She swings her arm toward me. "And you carry it around your neck and on your lying tongue. I smell it in your words."

"Your senses deceive you," Ari says, stepping forward.

Renna's pale eyes go to him. Her lips curve, and her voice dips into a lower, more seductive octave. "And what would you know of senses, bottom-dweller? I'm surprised you can see farther than the end of your nose."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him stiffen.

“I see more clearly than you,” he says, contempt in his tone. “You say your power was stolen, and yet you’ve waited this long to reclaim it.”

I suppress a groan. *Not helping, Ari.*

“So you admit you took it?” Renna asks lightly. When Ari stays quiet, she gives a throaty laugh. “Really, Triton, how do you tolerate this fool?” She runs her eyes down Ari’s body. “He’s pretty enough, I suppose, but does that make up for his stupidity?” She gives Ari a considering look. “I suppose you fuck him on his stomach so you don’t have to hear him speak.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Ari spits, stepping forward. Behind Renna, the singing siren raises her voice.

“Ari…” I say under my breath.

Renna lifts an arched brow. “Such rudeness, Ari Razorfin. Every merman comes from a siren. One would think you’d treat us with more respect.”

“We respect you,” he says, “it’s just that your clan has more tits than brains.”

Gasps rise from the sirens assembled behind Renna. More than one tightens her grip on her spear.

I wait for a sinkhole to open in the sand and swallow me. Ari and diplomacy are like oil and water. I don’t fault his pride. For a long time, it was his only possession. But riling Renna and her clan will *not* end well for us. I have Crallek’s voice as a last resort, but I don’t know if I can wield it without using the very blood Renna accuses me of stealing.

And the second I grip the seashell around my neck, Ursan will know what Ari and I did to his father.

Renna’s smile disappears at last. She pulls her trident from the sand and growls at Ari. “It’s no surprise you lack manners. You don’t belong in polite company. You don’t belong on the surface at all, do you?”

“Shut up,” Ari says. He takes another step forward. Cursing, I grab his arm and try to haul him back, but he shakes me off with surprising strength. “Shut your mouth or—”

“You’ll shut it for me?” Renna asks. “A threat as common as your blood, bottom-dweller.” She grips her trident, her pale eyes gleaming with malice. “You cheated your way onto the land, *whore*. You belong at the bottom of the sea, fighting in a pit or lying on your back in a pleasure house.” She looks at me. “Although, I suppose you landed there anyway.” She turns back to Ari and smiles. “You just serve a single client.”

Ari roars.

Everything slows.

He launches himself at Renna.

I grab at him again, but he slips through my fingers.

Behind Renna, the sirens open their mouths on a song.

Renna raises her trident, murder in her eyes.

Ursan appears in front of me, his broad back like a wall between Ari and the siren queen.

"STOP," he commands, his power rippling outward and knocking me back several steps.

Renna stumbles back too, her eyes flaring wide.

The sirens' song cuts off.

"YOU DON'T WANT TO HURT ARI," Ursan says, his words vibrating with power. He lifts a muscular arm and points to the sea. *"YOU WANT TO GO HOME. NOW."*

Chapter 15

Ursan

The siren queen is powerful. But I am more so.

When I faced off with Ari that first night on the Aerie's rooftop, my power sizzled under my skin. When I told the flowers in Triton's garden to grow, it roared.

Now, it booms, rippling across the water and disrupting the waves. The ocean rushes away from the shore, exposing the uneven seabed littered with shells.

"YOU WON'T HURT ARI," I tell Renna. The words are mine but the voice belongs to my power. It sears my throat, burning like I've swallowed the sun. It wants to burn hotter. Just like that night Ari pushed me to tell him exactly what I wanted, the power longs to grow. To seethe and then rage until it pushes Renna and the sirens into the sea—and then keeps pushing until they can't threaten Ari ever again. The power would push forever. It bulges in my throat and rolls up to my eyes, tinting my vision a sickly green.

But there is no coming back from forever.

"You can command anything that possesses a will."

Yes. Triton was right. I command anything with a will—including me. The power would swell large enough and rage high enough to ensure Renna never hurts Ari again. It would kill her.

But I will *not* allow it. Because if I did, I would lose myself.

It hurts—gods, it hurts—but I seize the burning edge of the power and haul it back. I do this in my mind, although my fingers curl as I grit my teeth and force the power to heel.

Renna's pale eyes fix on my hand, which I still hold outstretched. Her chest heaves, and the knuckles of her hand gripping her trident turn white. A tall siren with a riot of blond braids moves to Renna's side and holds her spear at the ready. Fear sheens her golden eyes, but her gaze is unwavering.

Renna's mate. She will protect her queen until the end. She loves Renna. *Love.* Intangible—and more valuable than anything I've dug up

from the seabed.

I cling to it as I wrestle the power back. *Love.* I see it in my mind's eye, and it looks like Ari slanting me a smile as we walk the streets of the Hallows. It looks like the longing that steals over Triton's face when he stares at Ari when Ari isn't paying attention. It looks like Ari cursing as bubbles fly up his nose. Like Triton showing me a spire he added to the sandcastle last year. Like Ari's face lighting up when I tell him he's magical. Like Dash and the sea nymphs cheering when I pull a new treasure from the sand.

I am more powerful than Renna.

But love is more powerful than anything—even the power that would burn through my throat and torch the world.

"ENOUGH," I gasp, and the power ripples in reverse, rolling backward in a shivering wave so potent it's almost visible. It undulates faintly green in the air before coalescing around my shoulders and sinking into my throat.

The ocean crashes back to shore, waves slapping sharply against the sirens' legs. Slowly, I become aware of my surroundings. Triton stands on my left. Ari is on my right. Both wait for my next move.

The sirens wait too.

I lower my arm. "Go home," I tell Renna, my voice low and scratchy but mine once more. "King Triton and Ari are honorable males. They didn't steal from you. Return to your territory. We'll have no bloodshed today."

Renna recovers swiftly, her expression shifting from fear to anger. But there's something else in her eyes as she looks at my chest. She moves forward, her pale stare roaming over my tattoos and lifting the hair on my nape.

Suddenly, she laughs, the sound as vicious and sharp as the fangs that peek between her red lips. "Oh, this is rich," she says, taking another step forward.

"Renna," Triton rasps, an odd-sounding note in his voice. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was panicked.

The siren queen keeps coming, her smile growing as she peers at my chest.

"That's far enough," I say, putting up a hand.

She stops, but her smile stays firmly in place as she lifts her eyes to mine. "Honorable males who don't steal." She tilts her head, and now her

smile is almost coy. “Is that what they told you, Ursan, Son of Crallek?”

My stomach drops. Confusion assails me, sending a dozen questions spinning through my head.

“Renna,” Triton says sharply. “There is no need for this.”

“You know my name,” I say, and now I step toward Renna. “How—?”

“It’s on your chest, boy.” She tosses Triton a scathing look. “Sounds like your *king* didn’t tell you.” She turns her gaze back to me, and now the mocking look in her eyes is gone. “A sea witch brand-new to his power is a valuable prize. I’d be wary of bedding down with thieves if I were you.” She turns around and gives a high-pitched *yip*. One by one, the sirens turn and dive into the water. Seconds later, their tailfins burst above the surface before disappearing beneath the waves.

Renna strides into the sea. As the last siren tail flicks out of sight, she looks at Triton over her shoulder. “This theft will not go unpunished. There will be repercussions.” With a final hiss, she whips around and dives into the ocean. Her tail flashes. Then she’s gone.

Silence descends over the beach. Tension rolls off Triton and Ari. For a moment, I’m afraid to move—like the sand might crack open if I put a foot wrong or dare to speak.

Triton moves first, sighing as he steps in front of me. “You have questions, Ursan.”

“Yes,” I rasp. “She…” I angle my head down, staring at the tattoos that have always been part of me. Red flashes in my peripheral vision, and when I look up, Ari stands beside Triton. Ari’s face is pale, his features pinched and anxious.

The unfamiliar expression triggers a similar emotion in me. I look between them as Renna’s words echo in my head. “Wh-What did she mean?” My heart pumps hard, knocking painfully against my chest. “Do you know what my tattoos say? Have you known this whole time?”

“We’ll talk inside,” Triton says. He glances at Ari. “We’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

Ten minutes later, my anxiety hasn’t lessened. And Ari is still pale as he sits on the edge of a driftwood sofa in the parlor.

When we returned to the castle, he and Triton both ducked upstairs to throw on some pants. Ordinarily, I might resent the fabric, but I'm glad for it now. I need barriers between us. I need some kind of fence around my heart until they assure me they're not going to break it.

I sit in one of the chairs that face Ari's sofa. Triton sinks into the other. Both males are stiff. The feeling from the beach returns. It's like we're all fragile and the slightest upset will shatter us.

Ari leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. He laces his strong, elegant fingers together and stares at a spot on the crushed shell floor near my feet.

"I lied to you, Ursan," he says.

Triton stiffens. "Ari—"

"It's fine," Ari says, meeting his gaze. They hold each other's stare for a moment. Whatever passes between them satisfies Triton enough for him to settle back in his chair.

Ari resumes looking at the floor. When he speaks, it's in short sentences, like he hates the words and wants to use as few as possible. "You asked who can walk on the land. I told you mermen. Sirens. Sea witches." His brow furrows. "That was a lie. Or partly one. Only the highborn can shift. I am…not highborn. I'm as low-class as they come."

Triton stirs but stays silent. Outside, the ocean beats against the shore, the soft shushing of the waves easy and peaceful—and a glaring contrast to the tension and pain rising in the parlor.

"I'm not meant for the land," Ari says. "I wasn't born a shifter. I told you I come from the Deep. I didn't lie about that. If you're born there, you usually die there. Because there's nowhere else to go. If you're lucky enough to escape the fighting pits, you either join a gang and learn to steal or learn to suck a dick to get enough food to survive."

"Why not leave?" I ask, horror filling me. "Why would anyone stay?"

"No choice but to stay," Ari says bluntly. "Folk from the Deep struggle to breathe above a certain depth. We can't take bipedal form. We're weak —"

"You're not weak," Triton says swiftly.

Ari keeps speaking as if he didn't hear. "I was born in the breeding shacks on the edge of the fighting pits. My siren mother was a pleasure worker. She birthed me for coin and left me on the doorstep for my father to

fetch. He fed me until I was old enough to fight. Then he sold me to the trainers."

The flimsy fence around my heart bends. I want to tell Ari to stop before it collapses. But I force myself to stay silent. I sit in my chair and bear witness to his story.

"The pits are like a prison," he says. "You either fight or they beat you until you learn to fight. Suffice it to say I learned to fight. I did things I'm not proud of. But I wanted to live. Some lads didn't. They died quickly in the pits and went into the stew the trainers served us." Eyes on the floor, he rubs a palm over his mouth. "I didn't want to end my days in the belly of some skinny punk from the barracks. So I kept fighting." He gestures to his lip. "I earned this scar. I learned not to make stupid mistakes. But one day there was a boy. Green eyes and tail. Red hair like mine. He was a year or two younger. My half-brother. I knew right away. I didn't want to kill him. I made a stupid mistake by showing him as much. I hesitated, and he came for me. Wounded me."

"Ari…" I croak, my heart pumping so hard I know he and Triton can hear it. Wood creaks under my hand, and I realize I'm in danger of breaking the chair's armrest.

Ari's voice changes, going hard and flat. "He would have killed me. So I killed him. And then I couldn't kill anymore." He glances up—a quick flash of green there and gone before I can read his emotions. "Renna called me a whore. I thought about becoming one. Some fighters sell themselves to the pleasure houses once they're too beaten up to work the pits." He gestures to his lip again. "But the kinds of males who want someone scarred like me aren't the types I want to bed down with." His mouth twists. "They have certain…tastes. I would have ended up with more scars. Maybe the kind you can't see."

Outside, the waves continue pounding the shore. I want to turn to the window and scream at them to stop.

Ari shrugs. "I had nowhere left to go. I couldn't sink any lower. So I swam straight up, leaving the Deep behind. I swam for days even though my lungs burned like fire. I think I slept as I swam. I kept going until I could see the sun, and then I kept going some more. Eventually, I couldn't breathe. And that was okay. I didn't want the air. I just wanted to see the land. I swam, and the sun grew brighter. It blinded me, but it was so

beautiful. I reached for it. Broke through the surface and crawled onto the beach. And with my last breath, I was free."

A tear drips from my jaw and lands on my knee, soaking through my pants and touching my skin.

"I would have died there," Ari says. He lifts his head and looks at Triton. "But a prince found me."

Triton holds Ari's gaze for a long moment before turning to me. "I breathed enough air into his lungs to get his heart beating again. Then I took him to my father's castle. Ari and I have been together ever since."

My heart squeezes. But then questions rush forward. "How could you breathe?" I ask Ari, scrubbing moisture from my eyes with the heel of my hand.

His green eyes swim with emotion. "There was a young sea witch at court. Triton's friend. He gifted me stronger lungs…and the ability to shift so I could walk with Triton in the sun." Ari straightens and draws an even breath. "That sea witch's name was Crallek. He was your father."

Numbness steals over me. In the back of my mind, I knew something like this was coming. I knew from the moment Renna said my name. But Ari and Triton didn't tell me. They didn't tell me they knew my father.

"Crallek was a friend," Triton says quietly. "He was never anything more." When I look at him, his shoulders are stiff, an aura of awkwardness about him. "I just want you to know." He clears his throat. "Ari and I would never— It wasn't like that."

"Ursan," Ari says. "There's something else—"

"Your father died a war hero," Triton says, cutting Ari off. "Leviathans killed my father, and I became king. Years later, they murdered the Lord of the Sea Syndicate and slaughtered his clan. Emboldened, they started picking off clans one by one. The other syndicate lords asked me to rule the sea. Part of that meant banishing the leviathans. Your father helped me do that. He gave his life during that fight. He died a hero."

I take a moment to absorb this. "Why didn't you tell me before?" I look between him and Ari. "Why haven't I known about this since I was a child? I thought I was alone in the world—"

"We didn't know about you," Triton says. "Sea witches don't live in clans like the Folk. Crallek kept to himself. He never told us of any breeding contracts." Triton's blue eyes are steady as he holds my gaze. "Ari and I didn't know."

I gesture to my chest. “But you knew as soon as you saw me. You should have said something.”

“And tell you how powerful you are? How you can rule the sea and maybe the land if you wish?” Triton’s tone gentles. “We wanted to know you first. Not your power. You. And you are worth getting to know, Ursan.”

The wall around my heart fades. Then I turn to Ari, and my heart threatens to break. He stares at that spot on the floor with a blank expression. It’s like he’s empty. Like he shared the deepest parts of himself and now he’s hollowed out.

“Ari,” I say, and then I’m out of my chair and kneeling at his feet. Green eyes meet mine as I capture his hands—his beautiful, strong hands that are deadly and gentle. Hands that have killed and hands that have drawn the sweetest, most soul-wrenching orgasms from my body. “Ari,” I say again because I don’t know what else to say. I feel helpless. “What can I do?”

His gaze lowers to our joined hands, his dark-red lashes brushing cheeks dusted with golden freckles. “I’m tired,” he murmurs.

“Then we’ll go to bed,” I say.

I lead him there and he lets me, trailing as I tug him up the stairs and into the bedroom splashed with late afternoon sunlight. Triton follows, and the two of us end up on our sides with Ari between us. I try to give Ari his space. I tell myself I’m not going to touch him or kiss him.

But of course I do both. It’s okay, though, because his mouth opens under my lips and his hips roll against mine.

“Fuck me,” he breathes when he comes up for air. His hands are all over me, smoothing up and down my arms like he’s worried I might vanish if he doesn’t hold on tight.

Still, I hesitate. “Ari…” He looked so raw after he told his story. Vulnerable. And if Ari taught me anything, it’s that vulnerability and sex must always be cautious bedfellows.

“I want it,” he says, clearly reading my concerns on my face. He brings my hand to his erection. Then he stares directly into my eyes like he wants to eliminate all the questions in mine. “Fuck me, Ursan. Please. I need to feel.”

It’s the *need* that gets me. Ari is big on telling me what he wants. Even knowing him for such a brief time, I already know he rarely admits what he needs.

I roll, flipping him under me and stretching my larger body over his. I push a knee between his thighs and capture his lips, pouring all the sorrow I feel for his past into my kiss. After a minute, I hear Triton leave the bed and pull lube from one of the driftwood tables on either side of the big bed. When he returns, he positions himself on his knees above Ari's head.

I pull back and stroke a thumb over the spray of freckles across Ari's cheek. "You're sure?"

"Yeah," he says, his mouth wet from our kiss. He spreads his legs and draws his knees up, one ankle hooking behind my thigh. He rolls his hips, grinding our leaking dicks together. "Give it to me hard. I want to feel it tomorrow."

Gods. My reservations evaporate. I sit up so I'm on my knees like Triton. I push Ari's legs higher, and Triton grasps Ari's ankles, spreading him wide.

They make eye contact, and for a second I think I see a shadow move through Ari's eyes. But then Triton bends and kisses Ari's forehead. After a second, Ari sighs, and Triton moves his kiss to Ari's lips.

I watch them for a moment, then go to my elbows and kiss Ari's hole, making him jerk and moan loudly. His pucker clenches hard, and I flutter my tongue against the bunched skin, coaxing the little whorl open. When it relaxes, I reward it with a few slick thrusts.

"Ungh!" Ari grunts above me, his and Triton's kiss sending soft smacking sounds drifting around my shoulders. I stiffen my tongue and poke it deeper, spearing Ari's hole. Getting him wet and open. I linger at my feast, taking my time with the quivering ring of muscle. I suck and lick, sweeping my tongue up and down before tracing slow circles around Ari's rim.

"Ursan!" he rasps, his thighs shaking. He squirms, but he has nowhere to go. Not with Triton holding his ankles and keeping him folded in half.

I sit back and admire my efforts, my dick throbbing as I watch a shiny stream of saliva dribble from his pink opening. Triton watches, too, his blue eyes locked on Ari's hole. Ari's chest rises and falls rapidly as he pants, his green eyes dark with lust. I push a finger inside him to the second knuckle and give him a playful smile. "You like being my bottom boy?"

His nostrils flare. "Gods, what have I unleashed?"

I chuckle as I feel around for that magical spot he showed me—the one that makes me lose my mind any time his skilled fingers enter me. I find my

prize, and he moans shamelessly as I stroke it. I finger him until he's thrusting his ass at me and filling the bedroom with curses, and then I grab the bottle of lube Triton left by my knee and drizzle a liberal amount on my fingers. Triton keeps Ari's ankles at his shoulders, his body spread for whatever I want to do to it.

Everything. I want to do everything to Ari. I rub moisture around his hole before sliding up to his balls and grasping his straining dick. I give it a few pumps and watch his hole clench and reopen like it's gasping for air. It's so hot. Beyond anything I could have dreamed during those long, empty nights in my cave. I thought I had what I needed then. Now I realize I was searching for it, surrounding myself with treasures that never felt like enough.

"Yes," Ari whimpers, one hand going to his dick. He grips his thick length but doesn't stroke. Just squeezes the base of his shaft like he's trying to stave off release.

Because he doesn't want to come just yet, I realize. He wants me inside him first.

"Yeah, Ari," I say gruffly, pumping my finger into his hole. "I think you like bottoming for me." I tease him, but it's been that way among the three of us quite a few times this week, with Ari on the receiving end of things—and often receiving on both ends. We fit each other, his wiry strength a perfect bridge connecting my bulk to Triton's.

"Fuck me," he begs, and his inner muscles squeeze my finger hard. "Please. I can't wait anymore."

It's perfect timing, because I can't wait, either. "Turn over," I order, pulling my finger from his ass and giving his cheek a light slap. Triton releases him, and Ari flips deftly to all fours and raises his ass.

My dick throbs, tip leaking, as I slick myself and then finger more lube into his hole. I'm generous with it, holding the bottle at the top of his cleft and letting liquid drip down his crease.

He gives me an exasperated look over his shoulder. "Do you need another bottle?"

In response, I toss the lube aside, shove him to his stomach, and flop on top of him. I thrust my hips against his ass and drag my cock up and down his cleft. As he moans, I bite the back of his neck. "Maybe I just like you extra juicy."

“Fuck,” he grunts, pumping his hips up. He fists the sheet in both hands, which is a gratifying sight. Knowing I can make Ari Razorfin mindless with need is *very* satisfying.

And if I don’t get inside him soon, I’m going to embarrass myself. Grabbing his hips, I haul him onto his hands and knees. I hold him open with one hand on his cheek and push inside, gliding easily as he moans deep in his throat. Triton lifts Ari’s head and strokes his red hair back from his face. Triton seems to sense when Ari’s inner muscles relax completely, because he chooses that moment to guide his plump cock into Ari’s mouth.

All three of us groan. Lust batters me, shoving at me from all sides like wild currents in a storm. Squeezing Ari’s hips, I give him a few slow thrusts. I have every intention of holding that pace, but I’m lost the moment I see Ari’s perfect hole swallowing my cock, the pink rim stretched taut around my glistening shaft. With a hoarse cry, I fuck him hard, my hips slapping against his muscular ass. The muscle bounces, spurring my lust higher.

Ari takes it, his head bobbing in time with my thrusts as he sucks Triton’s dick. Triton stares down at Ari like he’s viewing a priceless work of art. The sea lord’s hair flies around his broad shoulders. The tangle of necklaces jostles between his thick pecs. Pink nipples stand up for attention, making me long for my tentacles. If I could whisk us down to the sea, I’d own Triton’s passion, too. Maybe throw him to his back and set my suckers on those plump nipples just to see if he can come without anyone touching his dick.

As if he senses the wicked direction of my thoughts, Triton lifts his head. Our gazes lock, and then we’re both leaning forward. We meet over Ari’s back, our mouths clashing in a searing kiss that has my balls drawing up tight.

Ari moans, his powerful body rocking between us. He throws his hips back, fucking himself on my dick.

Pressure. Heat. The clench of his ass is so different from his channel. Tight and hot and ruthless as it squeezes my cock. The wild currents rush me, and I come on a shout, my hips jerking as I pump Ari’s ass full of hot cum. I expect Triton to do the same with Ari’s mouth. Instead, he waits for me to come down. When I ease my softened dick from Ari’s ass, he makes his move. Within seconds, Triton is on his back with Ari straddling him.

“Sit down,” Triton growls, one big hand wrapped around his dick. Ari obeys, planting his feet on either side of Triton’s hips so he’s crouching over Triton’s shaft. My cum drips down his thighs, and it squishes in his hole as he sinks all the way down on Triton’s dick.

“Oh…*gods*,” Ari says, tipping his head back. He braces himself with a hand on Triton’s thigh and rides the hell out of Triton’s dick. I can only watch, my dick plumping again as Ari bounces. His cock bounces too, sailing up and smacking his stomach over and over.

“That’s it,” Triton snarls, blue eyes glittering. He holds Ari’s ass on both palms and watches his dick disappearing into Ari’s hole. My seed coats Triton’s shaft and smears Ari’s thighs. Their grunts fill the room. The thick sound of my cum pumping into Ari’s hole makes me join them, groans spilling from me as I flop next to Triton and palm one sweaty, swollen pec. I pinch his nipple, rolling the taut peak between my fingers.

“Ahhh!” Triton pumps his hips, driving up and up and nearly bucking Ari off him. “Coming!” he bellows. His thrusts grow frantic, and then he cries out and shudders.

“Fuck!” Ari grabs his flailing dick and jerks himself fast. Instantly, his cum spurts over Triton’s abs and chest, landing in creamy ropes. He stops bouncing and curls over, gasping as he continues milking his cock while Triton fills him.

When it’s over, we end up in a tangle of sweaty limbs with Ari in the middle. He kisses Triton, then rolls and kisses me, shuddering a little when I delve my fingers between his cheeks and stroke his messy hole. We doze as the afternoon turns to evening. At some point, I wake up spooning Ari, and it’s the easiest thing in the world to slip inside him. I fuck him slow and easy, my lips brushing the short, bristly hairs at his nape as the waves crash outside. I reach around him and find his cock, and he turns his head and kisses me as I stroke him in time with my thrusts. We come together, huffing into each other’s mouths.

Day fades to night, and I turn to my back as my thoughts grow sluggish and sleep tugs at me. I smooth a hand over my chest, letting my fingers wander over my tattoos. Triton’s explanation makes sense. He and Ari didn’t tell me about my father because they were testing me. I have to assume I passed their test.

But as I drift in the space between consciousness and sleep, the memory of Renna’s voices flows through my head. *“A sea witch brand-new*

to his power is a valuable prize. I'd be wary of bedding down with thieves if I were you."

Triton and Ari took blood from the sirens. Sleep tugs harder as I realize I forgot to ask them about it. Why do they need siren blood? I don't know anything about running a syndicate. I don't know much about anything at all. But people usually don't steal unless they're trying to hide.

If Triton and Ari stole that blood, what are they hiding?

Chapter 16

Triton

I stand at the window and watch Ursan and Ari sleep.

They fit so well together, Ursan's tan, muscular thighs tangled with Ari's paler, sleeker legs. They've been dozing for a solid hour, both worn out from sex and the heavy, emotional moments in the parlor. Ursan's thick arm is wrapped around Ari's torso. As I watch, he tugs Ari closer, his hold gentle and protective. I don't know how Ari would feel about it were he awake. But in sleep, he seems just fine with it, his face relaxed and peaceful.

I let my gaze travel down the intricately scrolled tattoos on Ursan's forearm. I know the meaning of every line. Every swirl and glyph.

Ari wanted to tell Ursan the truth earlier. He didn't like being cut off, but he deferred to me like he always does. Ari has never crossed me in public. I know he never will—just as I know he won't let me get away with keeping Ursan in the dark. At the very least, he's going to give me an earful about how foolish I'm being. We can't have that conversation here, but we need to have it soon. Like right now.

I go to the bed, crouch before Ari, and cup a light hand around his cheek.

Green eyes pop open. Then narrow. *What's wrong?* he mouths.

Home, I mouth back, jerking my head toward the window.

Objections huddle in his eyes, but he gives a slight nod. Moving with stealth he honed in the pits, he lifts Ursan's arm and slides out from under it. He leaves the bed and carefully pulls a sheet over Ursan's big body.

The loving ministrations tug at my heart. Ursan and I might be the only two living souls who know the full details of Ari's past. Ursan might not realize it, but Ari sharing it is a sign of profound trust—and other deep emotions none of us are ready to say out loud just yet. But Ari said it loud and clear with his body. He shared himself with Ursan, seeking out the most intimate connection possible between two males. Ari's actions tonight said a

lot. I don't know if Ursan is experienced enough to have heard all the unspoken things Ari said.

But something tells me the sea witch heard just fine.

Ari stands at my side, his body tense and his expression unreadable. I open my mouth to say something but shut it when I can't find the right words. And anyway, it's not safe to speak in front of Ursan. If he wakes in the middle of that conversation, things will unravel completely.

Green eyes bore into mine as Ari awaits my next command. With a sigh, I go to the door. As always, he follows.

We leave the castle and catch the currents for home, neither of us speaking. The journey feels faster this time. Probably because I don't want to face Ari at the end of it.

Bastian is present in the Great Hall when we enter. It's obvious he's been waiting a while—maybe from the moment we left for the island. He moves forward, disapproval and anger swirling in his dark eyes.

"I would speak with you—"

"Not now," Ari says, the tension he carried from the island ratcheting more tightly around him.

Bastian gives him a scathing look. "Not *you*. I wish to speak to the king."

For a moment, I think Ari will deck him. Just as I move to step between them, Ari darts around Bastian and heads for the doorway.

Bastian doesn't bother watching him go. My advisor's expression turns urgent as he moves closer to me.

"What is it?" I ask, worry building. Bastian has his faults, but I've never doubted his loyalty. He has the clan's best interests at heart. Whatever he's anxious about, it can't be good.

He pitches his voice low. "The sirens have canceled this season's breeding contracts." He swallows. "And all future contracts."

Near the doorway, Ari whips around. *"What?"* He's across the Hall in a flash, his tension replaced with anger and disbelief.

I curse under my breath. A roar builds in my chest, but I swallow it. It's late, and most of the clan is sleeping. I can't let this news get out. Not until I know how to spin it. Downplay it. But how am I going to tell my clan they can't have children? We were so close to recovering our pre-war numbers.

I look at Bastian. "Did Renna say why?"

“Her messenger said I should ask you.”

Fuck.

Bastian’s scrutiny is like a weight. He knows this is my fault, but he doesn’t know why. When I don’t offer an explanation, he makes a negative sound. “What should I tell the clan?” he asks tightly.

“Nothing,” I say. “I’ll handle it.” I move past him, eager to reach my bedchamber so I can figure out a plan.

Bastian is right on my tail. “This news won’t keep, my lord. You *must* make an announcement.”

“I said I’ll handle it,” I bark over my shoulder. Ari streaks to my side. Together, we approach the doorway.

Bastian’s claws scuttle faster. “Triton—”

I whirl around, sending bubbles swirling in a dizzying arc. Fury beats at me as I loom over Bastian. “I am king here, and I said I’ll handle it. You will tell the clan *nothing*. You will keep your mouth shut. End of discussion. Do I need to repeat it a third time?”

Silence reigns. Ari is a potent, ready presence at my back. Bastian stares at me, his chin lifted and his dark eyes full of something that looks suspiciously close to betrayal.

I’ve seen that look before. On Crallek’s face. On Ari’s. On Ursan’s. No matter how hard I try to do the right thing—the *necessary* thing—I end up staring into eyes that reflect my own faithlessness.

Bastian holds my gaze a moment longer. Then he offers a wordless bow and scuttles from the Hall.

I don’t look at Ari. I can’t. But he stays by my side as we move through the quiet hallways. He doesn’t speak until he closes the door behind us and leans against it.

“Bastian is right.”

I round on him and give a humorless laugh. “You and Bastian agreeing on something? This is a momentous occasion.”

“Tell the clan nothing,” he says, green eyes throwing sparks. “A theme for you today, my king.”

I draw a deep breath. “You’re angry about Ursan.”

“I don’t appreciate being silenced.”

Frustration rises. “We’ve spoken about this, Ari. Ursan can never find out we killed Crallek. And what’s the harm in letting him think his father was a hero? It’s not even a lie. Everyone else believes it.”

Ari comes away from the door. “It’s not completely true, either. More importantly, Ursan isn’t *everyone else*.”

“No,” I say, drifting forward. “He’s a sea witch, and he has the potential to be extremely dangerous.”

Ari scoffs, his gaze censorious. “You don’t believe that anymore. You’ve tested him. We both have. You saw him on the beach with Renna. He pulled back from the edge because he doesn’t want to hurt people. He’ll only get more proficient with age. So don’t pretend you’re worried about his power. Don’t lie to yourself, even if you’re determined to lie to him.”

Anger flares hot. “You act as if I *enjoy* deceiving him.”

“Do you?” he challenges. “You seem to think it’s easier than being honest.”

I fling up a hand. “Oh, because telling him we’ve lied to him from the beginning is going to be so simple and straightforward.”

“And you think it’ll be better if he finds out years from now?” Ari shakes his head. “You’re deluding yourself, Triton.” He gestures between us. “We don’t keep things from each other. You can’t sleep in the same bed with someone every night and lie to their face every morning.”

“This is for his own good—”

“No!” Ari cries, coming to me and taking my arms. His eyes search mine, an obvious plea in the green depths. “It’s not good for Ursan, and it’s not good for us. This deception serves no one, my love. Not anymore.” He drops his hands and I think he’s going to leave, but then he roots among his necklaces until he finds his mating pearl. He holds it up, the fat, green pearl shining between his fingers. Before I can say anything, he digs among my necklaces, steering clear of Crallek’s voice and pulling my pearl from the strands. He holds both pearls in his open palm so they sit side by side, perfectly matched.

My heart pounds as I stare at them.

“*This* is what’s at stake,” Ari says softly. “Commitment. Partnership.” His voice goes husky. “Love.”

I look up, and his eyes are shining. And sad.

“I won’t have lies between us,” he says. “I can’t mate you if you refuse to tell the truth.”

My lips part. “Ari…” I swallow against a suddenly dry throat. “What are you saying?”

He tips my pearl off his hand, then tucks his back under his necklaces. “It’s like Dash said. I know my heart. I can’t lie to Ursan anymore. Please don’t ask me to.”

My gut clenches. I’m afraid to breathe. Afraid to blink—because if I do, I worry my future might disintegrate before my very eyes. Every carefully laid plan, every sacrifice, is drifting away on a tide I can’t control. Triton, King of the Sea and King of Nothing all at the same time. I open my mouth to respond, but Ari beats me to it.

“Ursan isn’t the problem anymore,” he says, drifting backward. “It’s you. It’s clear to me you won’t tell Ursan the truth. So I will. Tomorrow, I’ll return to the island and tell him everything.”

Hurt and anger swell my chest. “You would go against me? After everything we’ve sacrificed to keep the syndicate safe, you would do this? You’ll blow it all up, Ari. We’ll lose everything.”

Resolve shines from his eyes. “We stand to lose far more by clinging to this lie.”

“And what happens when you tell Ursan the truth?” I demand. “What if he decides he wants blood and rips us apart?”

“We’re already falling apart.” He flings an arm toward the door. “You heard Bastian. Renna canceled those contracts because we stole her blood. Bastian will figure it out sooner or later. The whole clan will follow. We balance on the edge of disaster already. Coming clean to Ursan is the only way to fix this.”

I stare, my heart and head pounding. Part of me wants to rage at Ari for threatening me. But he’s not making threats. These are promises.

After what feels like an eternity of silence, he comes to me and places his hands on my chest, one palm over my heart. “I’m going to the surface. I’ll be on my rock in the harbor.” He lowers his gaze, a frown appearing between his brows. “I need some time to think. I want you to think, too. I won’t do anything until I talk to you in the morning.”

He leaves, the gentle wake of his departure reaching me long after the door closes behind him. Slowly, I make my way to the bench under my window. A moment later, he flits by, grabs a current, and shoots out of sight.

After he goes, I sink to the bench and watch the ocean outside the palace. The coral castle glows incandescent in the dark blue water. The structure is healthy and beautiful after two decades of healing and rebirth. Even the water feels cleaner and healthier, the coral filtering it around us.

The vitality is the result of decades of sacrifice. And decades of lies. I've kept things from my people for their own good. Ari is wrong—lying has never been *easy*. I didn't like it, but I justified it.

My thoughts stray to my clan. Images from the last time I held court fill my head, twirling mermen pairs spinning off to find their passion. Can I justify stealing the siren blood? Was the theft worth it now that the sirens have canceled our breeding contracts? If I can't negotiate new ones, my clan is dead. There's no future without sons.

I find the seashell pendant among my necklaces and pull it over my head. The shell burns my palm, the center of the pendant glowing a faint green.

What would Ursan do if he knew the whole of my problems? I don't have to wonder. He'd deal with it, just as he dealt with Renna on the beach. He wouldn't lie. Somehow, he'd find a way to do the right thing without hiding behind half-truths.

Crallek's voice scratches at the edges of my mind. The shell has never felt as heavy as it does right now. Its green light winks in my palm, reminding me of Ari holding our mating pearls side by side in his hand.

And it's then I know what I need to do.

Two hours later, I slip out of a deepwater current and into a beautiful, vibrant reef. It's late, and the reef appears deserted. Appearances are deceiving. I have no doubt Renna already knows I'm here.

I glide over brilliant turquoise and peach corals, admiring their beauty. This reef is different from mine but no less stunning. Renna's clan thrives under her leadership. She has a reputation for being tough but fair. I'm counting on that still being true. Otherwise, I may not make it out of here in one piece.

Of course, once she hears my story, I may not make it out of here at all.

By the time I pass through the reef and arrive at the front gates of her castle, a contingent of guards await me. A dozen stunning sirens hover in front of the enormous palace. Each warrioress holds a black spear coated in sticky venom.

I recognize one of the females as the blond who leapt to Renna's side on the beach. Renna's mate. I address her first.

"I need to speak with your queen. It's urgent."

Golden eyes glitter with malice. "Come to return what you stole?"

"Yes," I say simply.

Renna's mate narrows her eyes but motions me forward as she turns toward the castle. The double doors swing open, granting us entry. It's been a long time since I visited Renna to ink our first breeding contracts. I should have kept up with her a little better. Maybe we could have been partners against the leviathans instead of me trying to subdue them alone.

I shove that thought aside. I can't change how I did things in the past. I can only try to do them differently now.

A long, coral-encrusted hallway opens into a cavernous, domed room. Renna sits on a purple coral throne sucking an oyster from its shell. Her pale green eyes narrow at my approach. She swallows and hands the oyster shell to a female on her left. The female places it in a bowl and flits away. Two guards brandishing spears hover at the base of the steps that climb to the throne.

Renna doesn't rise. She rests her arms on the sides of her throne, her long tail dangling lazily to the steps below. Her mate slips from my side and ascends to Renna's level. She brushes her tailfin against the queen's, then spins and slings an arm along the back of the throne. Golden eyes dare me to say something stupid.

I move to the bottom of the stairs.

The tip of a spear pokes the hollow of my throat. Instinct urges me to slap it away, but I force myself to remain still as I meet Renna's gaze.

"I come in peace," I say.

She raises an eyebrow.

Stifling the scowl that wants to form on my face, I reach up and unfasten the cord that holds the siren blood around my neck. I lift the vial from my necklaces and hold it aloft.

Renna's nostrils flare, her eyes fixed on the vial. She makes a sharp gesture, and one of the guards moves swiftly to my side. Her hand blurs as she snatches the vial. In another quick move, she ascends the stairs and presents the vial to Renna.

The siren queen uncorks it and inhales the contents. My heart sinks as seawater fills the vial, washing away the precious blood I've relied on to

help me keep the leviathans under control.

Renna's pupils overtake her irises as she focuses her ire on me. "Thief. Liar. You do not deserve to rule the sea."

Ignoring the speartip at my throat, I hold her gaze. "You're right. I don't deserve the honor. But I never wanted it in the first place. I admit I took the blood. I'm returning it now in the hope of making amends."

Renna gives a skeptical laugh. "And that's why you've come to me in the middle of the night, slinking through the dark without your bottom-dweller and your sea witch? You're a coward, Triton. Confess your theft in the light of day with your clan as witness. Then I might contemplate forgiveness."

"I'm not asking for it," I say. "But I would like to tell you why I sought the blood in the first place. Maybe you'll understand why I did what I did."

Renna appears to think it over. Then she sits back and waves for me to proceed.

The story spills from me in a rush. How the leviathans killed the previous Lord of the Sea Syndicate and how Crallek helped us banish them. How Crallek's power corrupted him, making him crave violence. How Ari and I did everything we could to contain him. How we finally realized he couldn't be contained. I tell Renna how we killed him and took his voice to ensure the leviathans never rise again. I admit that using the voice has grown more difficult over time, and that I finally broke down and purchased stolen siren blood from the du Sang vampire gang.

Renna absorbs all this with an inscrutable look on her face and the vial tucked in her hand. When I fall silent at last, she shifts forward on her throne. "And the young sea witch? What's his story?"

I don't want to share it. I don't want to admit that I knew Crallek had a son, and that Ari and I decided to hide him. I wince inwardly as I confess to allowing Ursan to languish in a cave for twenty years with sea nymphs as his only companions.

I don't want to say these things aloud, but I do, at last telling the truth. When I stop talking, another bout of silence descends. Then Renna rises and descends the stairs.

When she reaches the bottom, she moves her guard's spear from my throat. Eyes locked with mine, Renna lifts her wrist to her mouth and pierces her own flesh with her fangs. Blood seeps from the wound as she

lowers her arm and holds the vial to one of the puncture marks. Within seconds, the vial is full once more. She stoppers it and hands it to me with a mild expression.

"Better you than me to keep the leviathans at bay." She nods toward the vial I hold. "Use it well. Come to me if you need more."

"Thank you," I rasp, gratitude rising. Her blood is potent. With a siren queen's voice at my disposal, I'll be able to subdue the leviathans more easily.

She lifts her chin. "This changes nothing about the breeding contracts. Now go."

The order—and her refusal to reinstate the contracts—rankles, but I accept my win with as much grace as I can muster, slipping the vial around my neck and inclining my head. "I appreciate the gift of your blood…as well as your willingness to listen."

I take my time returning home. My thoughts twist and turn as I move among the currents. But by the time my castle comes into view, my head is clear. I've arrived at a decision.

The right one, I hope.

Pumping my tailfin, I glide through the castle and make my way to my bedchamber. Ari is returned from his rock, one arm thrown over his eyes as he sleeps on his back in our bed.

I slip in beside him and gather him in my arms. He wakes instantly, green eyes peering into mine.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"About what?"

"Everything." I stroke my fingertip along one curved auburn eyebrow. "I'm sorry I stopped you from telling Ursan the truth. I'm sorry I didn't tell him myself. I'm sorry we lied and stole for decades in the name of protecting the sea and our people."

Ari slides his tail along mine, rubbing gently. It's not sexual, even though it feels amazing. No, this is intimate. The comfort only a mate can give.

"You were right," I say quietly. "Ursan isn't the problem anymore. The lie is the problem. But I'm scared it was all for nothing. I'm terrified that telling Ursan will lead to war. That the leviathans will rise, and we won't be able to stop them this time."

Ari rests his hand over my ribs, his long fingers familiar and reassuring. I grab them and bring them to my lips, and I speak against them as I confess my deepest fear.

"But mostly I'm scared he won't forgive us," I whisper. "If we tell him we killed his father, I worry he'll reject us. And as much as I don't want to lose him, I *can't* lose you."

Ari rolls on top of me and pins my arms over my head. His lips brush mine as he murmurs, "I'm not going anywhere, my king. You're stuck with me. I love you." He trails a line of kisses down my neck. When he reaches my chest, he whispers, "Let me show you how much."

"Yes," I groan. But I also want to make sure we're in agreement, so I lift my head and meet his eyes. "We tell him tomorrow."

Ari nods. "Tomorrow morning we'll go find our witch and tell him the truth."

Our witch. I like the sound of that. A weight lifts from my shoulders. For the first time in what feels like forever, I smile.

Ari returns the expression with one far more wicked. "We'll tell him tomorrow." He moves down my body. "But tonight you're mine."

Chapter 17

Ursan

Three lines.

I stare at the slip of paper Triton and Ari left me. I've read it a dozen times since I found it on the table next to the bed. It doesn't take long to read.

Going home for the day.

Practice in the garden.

See you tomorrow.

Three lines. The crude, blocky handwriting is obviously Ari's. Something about the childish print tugs at my heart. I know if I ask, Triton will tell me Ari couldn't read or write when Triton found him.

But my tender feelings fade as I toss the note aside and stride to the window. I stare at the beach, squinting as I try to see if Triton and Ari left any footprints. Would it have been so hard to wait until morning so they could say goodbye in person? Or maybe answer some of the questions I have about my father?

Or tell me why they never take me with them when they leave?

The waves pound the shore and rush onto the beach, soaking the sand. I don't see any footprints. Everything is flat and smooth. Triton and Ari are always in a hurry to go "home." Triton always has his duties. Ari always has something important to do. But they never tell me what those duties and important things entail. And more and more, their duties sound like excuses.

Why are they so determined to leave me on the island? Is this the way it's going to be all the time?

Practice in the garden.

They go home, and they leave me here to grow flowers. But yesterday, I sent the sirens into the sea, forcing them to back down and stop threatening Triton and Ari. Maybe I won't understand Triton's duties and Ari's responsibilities. Maybe they're too complicated for me to comprehend. But why not give me a chance to learn? What is so special about "home" that I can't see it?

What are Triton and Ari hiding?

I stare at the waves rolling in. *"The ocean is dangerous,"* Ari always says. But what if he's lying?

Immediately, shame grips me. Ari isn't a liar. The male who showed me the surface isn't a liar. The male who taught me about pleasure isn't lying to me. He certainly wasn't lying when he shared his tragic past with me last night. No one could watch him tell that story and believe he made it up.

And Triton… *"They're here for you,"* he told me as the stingrays circled. *"They honor you."* He gave me a gift that day. He shared the sea with me—and then he shared the most intimate part of himself. Is that the kind of male who hides?

He hid your father from you, a little voice reminds me.

No. Triton tested me. He protected his people.

Renna's voice rings in my mind. *"A sea witch brand-new to his power is a valuable prize."* My father gifted Ari lungs and legs. He was powerful. Was he a friend…or a prize?

Wild thoughts tumble through my mind—ideas and speculation. Renna implied Triton and Ari would use me somehow. She accused them of stealing her blood.

My heart pounds, the sound drowning out the crash of the waves against the beach.

Practice in the garden. Keep practicing. Learn about power. Grow it. Get more of it.

So Triton and Ari can use it?

"No," I whisper, frowning at the sea. Triton and Ari wouldn't do that. But they're not here to deny it. And if things continue like this, they're going to come and go as they please while I sit on the island alone—limited to the knowledge they decide to give me.

Can I live like that? How is it any better than my cave?

Ari found me there. He's never told me how he knew where to look. He didn't act surprised to see me.

Because he *expected* to see me.

Heart thumping, I turn from the window and rush outside. Wind whips at my hair as I stride down to the beach and drop my pants. I keep going, one foot in front of the other, and then I'm running, my feet kicking up wet sand. I fly across the beach and dive into the water.

And like Ari, I swim.

I swim and keep swimming, grabbing a current like he taught me. I head in the direction of my cave. I remember that much, although nothing else. I don't know where I'm going but I have to go *somewhere*. I can't be afraid anymore, and I can't be confined. If Triton and Ari want me around, they have to want me around all the time—not just when it's convenient. And they owe me more answers than they've offered.

Tentacles pumping, I leap from current to current. Schools of fish flit past me, some turning their heads as I fly through the water. I don't slow. No, I go faster, swimming toward a destiny I refuse to cede to someone else.

"Ursan!"

The high-pitched voice jerks me to a halt. I jump from the current and spin around, my chest heaving as I struggle to catch my breath.

Dash emerges from a shadow in the sea. Seconds later, the rest of the nymphs follow. They swarm me, tails wagging and little voices peppering me with questions and exclamations.

"Where did you come from, Ursan?"

"Are you okay?"

"We missed you!"

"Where are you going?"

"Did you miss us?"

The last has me smiling as I spin, trying to keep the school in sight. They dart around and around, bobbing up and brushing their wispy tails against my skin. It's their way of showing affection, and I reciprocate, dabbing my tentacles against their tiny fins and fluttering tails.

"Hey, Dash," I call out. When he appears, I hold up a hand. "Remember high five?"

His round eyes crinkle as he bobs his head. He remembers, of course. He's the one who taught me. He offers a fin, and I pat it gently.

"It's good to see you, friend," I say, a lump in my throat. I should have asked Triton and Ari how the nymphs were faring. They've probably been worried.

"We've been worried!" a nymph pipes from the back of the school.

Another bobs their head. "Yes! We thought we'd never see you again!"

Dash turns around and shushes them. When he turns back, his round eyes hold a touch of exasperation. "I told them everything is fine, Ursan.

We know you're happy with Ari Razorfin."

"How do you know that?" I look over the school. "You've talked to him?"

Dash hesitates, something in his demeanor making me think he regrets his words. "We…"

"Could you take me to him?" I ask. "Now?" For one trembling second, my power tugs at me. I don't need to ask. I could *tell* the nymphs to take me to Ari.

The power beckons, and I push it away. Dash and the others are my friends. My best friends, actually. I won't ruin our friendship by stripping them of their will.

"Please," I say, holding Dash's gaze. "I need to talk to Ari. It's important."

After a moment, he nods. "We'll take you, Ursan."

"Thank you." I smile. "Thank you, my friend."

WE DON'T SWIM for long.

The nymphs guide me through a few more currents before leading me toward a tall reef. It soars so high I can't see over it. As we approach, Dash slows and gives me a wary look.

"This is clan territory."

Frowning, I look from him to the wall of coral. "This?"

"Over the wall, Ursan, sir." He hesitates. "Don't go too far if you don't want to be seen."

My heart pounds as I approach the reef. I swim up and up until I reach the top.

Mindful of Dash's warning, I peek my head over.

And I forget to breathe.

It's…a *city*. Like the Hallows on the surface, Triton's territory teems with life. Buildings line a sprawling grid of streets that stretches so far it narrows in the distance. Spires stab toward the surface, their sides decorated with coral and glowing anemones.

And everywhere, mermen move about. They glide alone and in pairs—and a few in trios—dipping in and out of buildings and swimming down

streets. Broad tailfins in a variety of shades beat the water. Broad chests adorned with dozens of necklaces gleam in the sunlight that slices through the sea in thick yellow shafts.

A castle rises on a hill at the edge of the thriving metropolis. It's a palace fit for a king. Fit for Triton and Ari.

But apparently not for me.

My heart sinks to my stomach, which clenches as I watch two mermen stop in the middle of a street and twine their tails together. A passerby cups his hands around his mouth and yells, "Get a room!"

One of the mermen grins and shouts back, "Get a love life!"

The passerby sticks his middle finger in the air, and the pair in the street laughs good-naturedly. The passerby rolls his eyes, but a smile touches his lips as he glides away.

"Ursan?" a soft voice says at my shoulder. I turn and meet Dash's round, worried eyes. His tail swishes slowly. Behind him, the school huddles, faces tense and eyes shaded with concern.

I push away from the wall and let myself glide slowly backward. "I think maybe I don't need to talk to Ari, after all."

Dash's tail droops.

I extend my arm, my hand curled into a fist. "Fist-bump," I say softly.

He stares at my hand for a moment, then bumps his fin against mine.

I force a smile. "I can find my way back to the island. I paid attention this time." I turn and head toward the currents that form highways across the sea. When I get a few paces away, I turn and wave to the school. "Thanks for showing me. I'll see you around."

One of the nymphs darts forward. "Where will you go, Ursan? Back to your cave?"

"No," I say at once. I'll never go back there. I can't face my treasures again. *Junk.* How Ari and Triton must have laughed over my piles of forks and sunglasses.

The nymphs look at each other, their little faces troubled. A shiver ripples through them, and then another swims forward. "You can stay with us, Ursan!"

I shake my head. "Thank you, but no." I swim backward and hope they don't follow. "I'm going to head back to the island. We'll talk soon, okay?" I give them another wave and swim quickly to the currents. I grab the first one and let it carry me away from the nymphs and the glittering city.

I let it carry me all the way back to the island, and I trudge onto shore and stand there for a moment, my head down and my mind curiously blank. I hold still, anticipating anger or maybe tears. But neither come. Instead, numbness steals over me, turning the inside of my mind a washed-out gray.

And suddenly, I want everything to be gray. No colors. Nothing bold or vibrant. Ari and Triton have denied me that world. If I'm stuck on the island, I'm going to make it match the nothingness in my head.

My feet carry me to the garden, where I stand before the tall, swaying flowers and lush green dirt.

I call to my power. It answers right away. Green and seething, it awaits my command.

I stretch both arms toward the flowers. *"DIE."*

Green stalks shrivel. Flowers wither, drop to the ground, and turn to dust.

"DIE!" I yell. *"ALL OF YOU, DIE!"*

Petals crumble. Row by row, thick vines topple. Within seconds, the garden is a graveyard. The flowers' corpses carpet the dirt, which is dry and fallow.

Trembling, I lower my arms. The breeze picks up, shifting the dead leaves and withered, colorless petals. The dead vines lie in piles like someone cut them down and tossed them carelessly on top of each other. The scene blurs as tears burn my throat and eyes. I wait for satisfaction to rise, but it doesn't come. Instead, I'm left with nothing but the lump in my throat and the rattle of dead leaves in my ears. My power lingers—green and emotionless. It doesn't bring joy, but it doesn't bring sorrow, either. Just a void.

A scuttling sound makes me whirl, fists raised to defend myself. A man stands in the doorway leading into the castle.

No, not a man. He's a crab-like creature—his lower half supported by eight strong legs, his upper body humanoid with two powerful-looking claws. They hang at his sides as he studies me, his brown eyes serious and touched with something that might be sympathy.

"Who are you?" I ask hoarsely.

Legs clack as he slowly descends the steps and enters the patio. "My name is Bastian. I knew your father." He looks past me, his gaze moving over the garden.

I move quickly, blocking his view. For some reason, I don't want him to see what I've done. I don't want the flowers exposed this way. They deserve better. Instinctively, I know I can't revive them. My power can't create. It can nourish a spark and coax it into a flame, but it can't conquer death.

Bastian's serious, sympathetic eyes fix on me. They dip briefly to my tattoos before lifting to my face. "You have questions, Ursan."

I fight the urge to fold my arms. Just as I don't want him to see the flowers in their vulnerability, I don't want him reading my chest. Bitterness leaks into my voice as I say, "Well, everyone else seems to have the answers. I certainly don't."

He nods. "You've been dealt an unfair hand. No one has been honest with you."

"And you will?" I scoff. "I don't know you." I dart a look behind him as it occurs to me that I shouldn't assume he's alone.

"I'm alone," he says quickly. His chest lifts as he sighs. "I serve King Triton, although I've come to regret that service lately."

"Why?"

Bastian's mouth tightens. "The Folk favor their own." He tips his head to one side. "You might have noticed that." He waves a claw. "Oh, mermen and sirens will consort with other creatures, but they certainly won't mate them. They'll take us on as advisors. They might even call us 'friend.' But take us into their fold? Accept us as full members of their clan?" Bastian gives a rueful smile. "No, we'll never be part of their world, Ursan. Not completely. It was the same for your father."

"What happened to him?" I demand, apprehension building. "Ari and Triton said he died fighting the leviathans."

Bastian offers a humorless laugh. "They're telling you half of the story." He shakes his head. "Typical."

I step toward him, my apprehension growing. "What's the other half?"

Anger flares in Bastian's dark eyes. His voice goes low. "Crallek fought the leviathans because Triton and Ari asked him to. He did it because he was their friend. But the war was a lie. An excuse. Triton and Ari wanted Crallek's power. They knew they couldn't take it on their own, so they picked a fight with the leviathans. They sent Crallek into the trenches. They waited until his back was turned, and then they seized their moment."

Bastian's eyes flash with hurt and outrage. "They put a knife through your father's heart. And then they stole his power."

My heart throbs. Denial roars in my mind. I shake my head as the roar grows louder and struggles to break free. "No," I say, stumbling back. I throw out a hand like I might ward off Bastian's words. "That can't be true." But as I stare into Bastian's eyes, I see regret…and sympathy.

"A sea witch brand-new to his power is a valuable prize."

Ari found me in the cave. He and Triton brought me to the island. They stole blood from the sirens. They kept their relationship with my father a secret. They didn't tell me until Renna read the tattoos on my chest.

They didn't tell me.

"I wish I could tell you something different, Ursan," Bastian says quietly. "I came here to right a wrong. For too long, I've kept Triton's secrets. I wish to make amends by telling you the truth. But you don't have to take my word for it. There's a place where you can get the answers you seek."

My heart thumps harder. "Where?"

"The trenches. The leviathans are the knowledge-keepers of the sea. That's why Triton sought to imprison them."

"They're dangerous," I say. "Triton says—"

"He says you should stay away from them?" Bastian asks. He tilts his head again. "Why do you think he might say that?" Bastian looks over my shoulder, his eyes roaming the garden before returning to me. "You're more powerful than your father. The leviathans can't harm you. But they can tell you everything you want to know. Once and for all, you'll have the truth. You'll know what's real, not just what Triton and Ari want you to believe."

I stare at him—at his serious brown eyes and oversize claws. He notices me looking and offers a sad smile.

"Crallek was my friend, too." Bastian lifts a claw. "He gifted me this form. He looked after his friends."

Just as he gifted Ari lungs and legs.

My memory fills with smiling green eyes and a scarred upper lip. White-and-gray hair and a deep voice telling me *"they honor you."*

What is true? Are Triton and Ari my lovers…or my jailers?

I swallow hard. "Where do I find the trenches?"

Chapter 18

Triton

I wake with Ari asleep in the crook of my arm. He looks so peaceful, a lock of red hair spilling over his forehead and his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Even in sleep, his tail intertwines with mine. I love him more than I ever thought possible—this male who helped me see the truth. Our relationship hasn't always been easy. At times, we've walked a jagged road paved with hardship and sacrifice. But I wouldn't want to walk with anyone else beside me.

Except now I think I need—Ari and I *both* need—someone else flanking us. And that someone else is a sea witch who simultaneously terrifies me and makes me want more for myself and Ari. Ursan was never supposed to mean anything to me. He was better off hidden and forgotten.

But that was before I met him. The sea should have eaten him alive. Instead, it embraces him. He should have been vicious and power-hungry. Instead, he's kind and generous with his affection. He's mindful of his power and hesitant to use it. He's not a pushover, but there is a core of innocence inside him I'm not sure anything can destroy. Like the stingrays, I'm drawn to it. Captivated by it.

Captivated by him. He fits Ari and me. Complements us.

Completes us.

The seashell pendant burns hot against my skin. Even in the morning light, Crallek's power glows faintly green at the lower edge of my vision.

It's time to make things right. I never should have harnessed Crallek's power. It should have gone to Ursan from the beginning. I can't change the past, but I can do better in the future. Ari is right. If I want Ursan in our lives, I can't start our relationship with a lie.

I stroke my fingertips down Ari's chest. "My love," I murmur, "wake up."

Green eyes blink open. "My king," he says throatily. His tail swishes against mine as he shifts out of my embrace and stretches his long arms over his head.

I let him have his way for a moment. Then I roll and pull him into me. My cock bulges from my pouch, and I rock my hips against his. “You feel perfect in my arms.”

His eyes drift shut as he tips his head back in invitation.

I take it, trailing kisses down his neck. “I love you so damn much.”

His chuckle vibrates my lips. “You’re in a good mood this morning.”

I smile against his pale skin. “Hard not to feel good after what you did to me last night.”

He moans softly as I continue our play, sucking gently at his pulse and grinding my tail against his. Before things can really escalate, he lifts his head and meets my gaze with serious eyes. “We shouldn’t linger.”

I run a hand up his spine, feeling the scars he’ll carry forever. The bunched, waxy skin reminds me of Ursan. No matter what I do, he’ll carry scars from his time in the cave. And after today, he’ll have to carry the knowledge that I killed his father.

Ari’s eyes soften. He smooths a fingertip over my brow. “You worry too much.”

Denials spring to my lips. But then I drag in a breath. “What if he can’t forgive me?”

“Us,” Ari says firmly. “I wielded the knife, my king.” He pushes locks of my hair off my shoulder and places a warm, strong palm on my neck. “But I believe Ursan will understand why we acted as we did. And I think he’ll accept why we waited to tell him. But we can’t wait any longer.”

A sense of urgency fills me. Despite the warm bed and Ari’s hard body pressed against mine, I’m not tempted to stay. “Let’s go get our witch,” I huff against Ari’s lips. “And if he doesn’t kill me for being a cruel, lying bastard, I’ll come back and speak with Bastian about the breeding contracts.”

Ari offers a rueful smile. “Talking to Ursan will probably be easier. And more pleasant.”

I slap his tail with mine, then tug him from the bed. Minutes later, I grab my trident, and we flit through the window and hop into a current.

My nerves settle as we speed toward the island. The seashell pendant hangs around my neck, but I feel lighter. The lies I’ve carried are a heavy burden. At last, I’m finally setting them down.

I’m the first out of the surf and onto the beach, and I stride toward the sandcastle with a sense of purpose swelling my chest. Ari’s lighter steps

crunch behind me. Halfway to the castle, I stop and wait for him. He flashes me a quick grin as he falls into step beside me, and together we ascend the gently rolling dune leading up to the castle.

The castle's double doors swing open, and I brace myself for Ursan's wide, expectant smile.

But it's not Ursan I see.

Bastian clatters out the door, his gaze on the sandy ground in front of him. He looks up, spots us, and freezes. Color drains from his face. Dark eyes dart from me to Ari and back again.

Ari stiffens, instantly throwing off enough tension to make me wince.

"Go," I command under my breath, and he doesn't hesitate to obey. He darts past me, flying up the dune and shoving Bastian out of the way. Barreling through the front door, he shouts Ursan's name. There's no response. Just the sound of waves crashing on the shore behind me. Or maybe that's the furious blood pumping through my veins.

Bastian lifts his chin, his powerful front claws held up in a defensive posture. "I only did what you could not, my king—"

His words cut off as I roar and sprint across the short distance between us. Planting the staff of my trident in the sand, I leap over him, spin, and throw an arm around his neck. I move swiftly backward, dragging him through the front doors and bellowing for Ari.

Ari skids into the foyer, his eyes wide with shock. "He's not here, Triton." His gaze settles on Bastian.

Before I can respond, Ari throws himself headfirst at Bastian, pummeling my advisor over and over. Bastian can't move his claws fast enough to keep up with Ari, who lands a jab in Bastian's gut before delivering an uppercut so strong it knocks Bastian from my grip. He falls to the ground and then lumbers to his feet, bleeding from a split lip. He raises both human arms in supplication.

"Where is he?" I demand. "What have you done?" At my neck, Crallek's voice glows. For once, I don't resent it. I'm ready to unleash every fucking ounce of his power to drag answers from Bastian.

When Bastian shakes his head, I snap. I hurl my trident, knocking him into the closest wall. The trident sinks into the stone, pinning Bastian in place. With a snarl, Ari starts toward him.

"It was obvious you couldn't kill the sea witch!" Bastian exclaims. He tugs at the trident, his legs clattering against the floor as he tries to free

himself.

"You're responsible for the sirens finding this place, aren't you?" Ari spits, both fists balled. He's seconds from attacking again, but wise enough to know beating Bastian senseless won't help us find Ursan.

"Tell me everything," I command my advisor. "And don't omit a single fucking detail or I'll let Ari do everything he's thinking of doing to you."

Clawing at the trident, Bastian gasps for air. I grip its handle and press the prongs deeper into the stone, the metal between each sharp point cutting into his jugular. A trail of thick, red blood pools in the hollow of his throat.

"I—I couldn't find him," he says. "I knew you were hiding him. So I told Renna you stole siren blood. I knew she'd tear the ocean apart to find you. The sirens were watching the clan's castle. You grew careless as you spent more time with Ursan. They followed you."

Ari lets out an angry roar and slams a heavy fist into Bastian's ribs. Bones crack, and Bastian gives a wheezing, agonized cry. Pinned by the trident, he sags against the prongs. Blood trickles down his chest.

"You know what?" I growl. "I don't give a fuck how and why you did it. I'll ask you that later when I toss you in the castle dungeon. Right now I only want to know one thing. Where the fuck is Ursan?"

Bastian licks his split lips, his brown eyes glazed with pain.

"Where is he?" I yell, fists raised. Every second that passes is time Ursan could be hurting. Or worse, in danger.

Bastian's eyes flick to the front doors. "I sent him to the leviathans. They'll do what you couldn't."

Ari sinks to his knees, then drops to all fours like he'll be sick.

My roar shakes the stone wall behind Bastian. He flinches but looks me straight in the eye. "Our people will be safe. It's the only thing I've ever cared about. You know that."

I grip the trident, ready to shove it through the wall and behead him.

"Triton," Ari says, his voice cutting through my rage. "Look."

I look at him and follow the direction of his gaze. Just outside the courtyard door, I see the garden.

Ari jumps up and strides into the sunlight. I follow, leaving Bastian pinned and gasping for breath.

The garden is a sea of black ash. Every colorful petal—every lush bloom—lies dead on the ground. The once-thriving patio is a graveyard.

Not a hint of life remains.

"You see?" Bastian croaks from inside. "He will turn. Just like his father."

Fresh rage pounds through me. I sprint to the door with Ari a silent ghost behind me. As we race past Bastian, I snarl in his direction. "Did it ever occur to you that the leviathans might use Ursan instead of killing him? Your treason could doom us all."

I don't wait for an answer, and I ignore Bastian's choked, desperate-sounding pleas for us to release him—to let him help. I rush from the castle and scramble down the beach. Then I fling myself headfirst into the waves with Ari right behind me. We grab the closest current and swim toward the darkest depths of the ocean.

The shell pendant pulls me down.

Good. I let it.

And I pray Ari and I aren't too late.

Chapter 19

Ari

I swim.

Guided by the seashell pendant around Triton's neck, I swim deeper than I've ever ventured. Deeper than the pit where I was born.

I swim faster. Faster than I swam the day I left the pit behind.

Triton and I race, tails beating at the black currents. *Faster.* We've lost so much time already. What if…?

But I can't think about *what if*. I can't allow myself to think it's too late—that maybe by comforting Triton and enjoying the night in my king's arms I've condemned Ursan to death. Or the alternative that Triton fears and Bastian was too narrow-minded and stubborn to consider. If the leviathans seize Ursan, they could turn him.

And then I'll have to watch his chocolate-brown eyes glow green with murder and malice. It'll be Crallek all over again, only this time I don't think I can stop it. Ursan is so much stronger than Crallek. I'll lose him—and then we'll lose the sea.

"We'll lose everything." Those were the words Triton whispered to me the day he acquiesced to the syndicate lords' request to take over leadership of the sea. *"If I fail, we'll lose everything."* Like a whirlpool spinning, we've come full circle. If we fail, we'll lose everything we've built together. Our relationship. The clan. The syndicate.

And a sea witch with dark eyes and dimples and a shy smile that can turn so wicked it robs my breath.

Faster. The pendant glows like a sickly green sun, its light growing brighter. Crallek's power longs to join with Ursan's. I have to hope it'll guide us to Ursan himself.

Faster. I descend, swimming down and down. My eyes are made for this. My body is built for it. I shove water behind me, clawing through the ocean to reach the male I never intended to fall in love with. Triton matches my pace, but he's starting to struggle. His blood is too blue and thick for

this depth. The pressure will get to him eventually. My king was never meant to sully himself in the Deep.

Faster. Panic beats at me, spurring me deeper. Bottom-dweller creatures flit past—fish with transparent bodies and myopic eyes. Blobs with simple brains and yawning mouths full of needle-sharp teeth. Everything is different in the Deep. Up is down and down is up. Life is pain and pain is deserved. Ursan doesn't belong down here any more than Triton does.

Drawing on a hitherto untapped reserve of power, I swim faster, streaking down the side of an underwater mountain.

A flash of color.

Purple.

"Ursan!" I shout, swimming so fast my arms become a blur and then disappear altogether. My muscles burn. My heart tries to pound from my chest. "Ursan, stop!"

"URSAN," a chorus of voices echo.

Dread stabs deep into my pounding heart. *Three drops.* I told Triton to use three drops like he was supposed to. Like Lucius du Sang told me the day I went to the surface and purchased the siren blood. *Three drops and no more.* Because a larger dose could kill him.

But the leviathans have grown harder and harder to persuade. Triton has been using more. But he listened to me last night when we argued—and he only used three. Not enough. It wasn't enough.

"URSAN, COME CLOSER." The leviathans speak with a thousand voices that echo as one, words rippling through the water and smashing into me.

Triton streaks through their wake, his mouth open on a cry. "No! Ursan, don't listen to them!"

But it's too late. We reach the base of the mountain. It spreads into a valley like the one where the stingrays saluted Ursan and everything changed between Ursan, Triton, and me. If I didn't know better, I'd think the leviathans planned it this way—that they reached through time and space and manipulated the three of us into venturing there simply so they could drag us here.

Symmetry. I've always liked it. Maybe they know it and seek to punish me for daring to see beauty in balance.

But I can't think of that now. Triton and I halt on the edge of the valley, our chests heaving.

Ursan hovers twenty feet in front of us, his big body dwarfed by the darkest, most malevolent monsters of the sea.

The leviathans stretch across the valley, their bulbous, shapeless bodies rolling over each other in a ceaseless and unsettling rearrangement. One by one, eyes pop open. Perfectly round and dotted with a tiny black pupil, the eyes spread across the leviathans' bodies until they cover every inch of slimy black skin. Thousands of wide, penetrating eyes stare with no lid to assuage the weight of their regard.

Ursan is too fucking close. If he drifts forward even a little bit, the leviathans will seize him. Overtake his mind and strip his power. They don't need arms to capture prey. They do it through sheer force of will. In slumber, they can be persuaded to stay dormant. But they're not slumbering anymore.

They're awake. The only thing stopping them from rising and killing us now is the promise of Ursan's power. Thousands of eyes dart continuously to Ursan as if the leviathans can't help but watch him. Again and again, they look at their prey, their pupils contracting as they plot and prepare to make their move.

"URSAN," the leviathans croon, their overlapping voices like ice picks piercing my skull. *"YOU WERE RIGHT TO COME TO US. EVERYTHING SINKS TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA. EVEN INFORMATION."*

Triton starts forward. "Ursan—"

"No!" He whips around, his body angled sideways like he wants to keep both Triton and the leviathans in view. His expression drives another ice pick into my heart. His eyes are glazed with shock, his forehead furrowed like he's riding a wave of agony and just barely hanging on. "Don't come any closer," he tells Triton, his voice laced with power. It glows in his throat, the eerie green illuminating the sea around him. His gaze dips to Triton's chest. "That pendant…" He lifts blazing eyes to Triton's. "You killed my father!"

"HE KILLED YOUR FATHER," the leviathans echo, thousands of voices rippling. Thousands of unblinking eyes wide with accusation. *"HE WILL KILL YOU, TOO."*

"No," I rasp, fists clenched at my sides. As Ursan's dark, agonized gaze flicks to me, I shake my head. "Triton and I would never—"

“You lied to me!” he says. “You took me from the cave, but you knew exactly where to find me.” He swings his gaze to Triton, who grips his trident so tightly I’m afraid he’ll snap it. “You looked me straight in the eye and said you didn’t know about me. But you did!”

“We didn’t want to lie,” Triton croaks. “We—”

“Shut up!” Ursan screams, his voice sizzling with so much power, Triton clamps his mouth shut even as his blue eyes bulge in protest. Ursan’s power swells, spreading green across the valley and sheening the leviathans’ eyes.

I extend a hand. “Ursan, please come away from there. Please, let’s talk. *Please.* There are things I want to tell you, but I need you to come away from there.”

“Tell me what?” he snaps. “More lies?”

“The truth.”

He stares at me, his big chest rising and falling. Raw emotion burns in his eyes. “I don’t know what to believe,” he says, his voice cracking. “I don’t know what’s true anymore.”

“MAKE THEM TELL YOU,” the leviathans say. *“YOU CAN MAKE ANYONE TELL YOU ANYTHING. USE YOUR POWER. USE WHAT YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN AND MAKE THEM TELL YOU WHAT IS TRUE.”*

Green swells in Ursan’s throat. His power climbs into his eyes, which burn like emeralds set aflame. “I could make you,” he whispers.

“You don’t have to,” Triton says, his voice no more than a thread of sound. When I jerk my head toward him, he grips the seashell pendant in his fist. His hand glows green, and then the power spreads up his arm. When it reaches his mouth, he speaks in a stronger voice, Crallek’s power allowing him to battle against Ursan’s persuasion.

Ursan grimaces, his eyes narrowing.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Triton says, his voice stronger, “just as soon as I return your father’s voice to you.”

No! Gods, no, not here!

I dart forward with a shout on my lips, but Triton moves too quickly. He releases his trident, letting it drop to the seabed as he sluices to Ursan’s side.

I stop, my heart in my throat as I watch the male I love hover on the edge of disaster.

Triton rips the pendant from his throat and offers it to Ursan. “This belongs to you.”

Vomit burns my throat. Now Triton is powerless with a valley of leviathans at his back. But he appears to pay them no mind as Ursan accepts the pendant. For a brief moment, a smile plays at the corner of Triton’s mouth. Then he sobers as he meets Ursan’s gaze.

“I lied to you,” he says, “and it was the second worst mistake of my life. I can’t undo what I did, but I can tell you the truth. Your father was my friend. He was a good friend and an excellent fighter. But his power corrupted his mind. He would have used it to hurt people. All of them, everywhere. He wanted no less than to rule the entire world. And that sounds a little absurd until you realize he was capable of achieving his goal. When Ari and I refused to go along with his plan, he tried to take over my mind. Ari, Bastian, and I killed him and took his power.”

“HE KILLED,” the leviathans say behind Ursan. *“HE STOLE YOUR FATHER’S POWER. HE DESERVES TO DIE.”*

“I do,” Triton says. “Because the worst mistake of my life was locking a child in a cave and pretending he didn’t exist.” Triton’s handsome face creases with shame. “I did it because I feared you, and because I’m a coward. You were just a boy, and I ordered Ari to enchant the coral so you would feel sick every time you tried to leave. I deprived you of friends and experiences. I stole your father’s power, and then I stole your childhood. I lied to you again on the island and denied knowing about you. I deserve whatever punishment you deem appropriate.”

“KILL HIM. KILL HIM NOW!”

“He’s lying!” I blurt, heart racing as every gaze swings to me—Triton’s and Ursan’s and the leviathans’ thousands of all-seeing eyes.

Triton frowns. “Ari…”

“*I* did it!” I say, a plan forming in my head. *Don’t blink.* That’s what the trainers in the pits always said. *You blink, you’re a dead fish.* I blinked a time or two—once when the squid split my lip open, another time when I met my brother’s eyes across the arena.

I don’t blink now. I stay still, my tailfin swiveling in a holding pattern as I meet Ursan’s gaze. “I put the lavastone knife in Crallek’s heart. I killed him. And I wanted to kill you. I begged Triton to give me the job. I wanted to do it personally.”

“Ari!” Triton says sharply.

Shock glazes Ursan's eyes. Then something much worse appears there.

Heartbreak.

Don't blink.

I can't hesitate this time.

"I wanted you dead," I say. "And now I'll finish the job." Moving with speed that kept me alive for almost two decades, I streak to Ursan, thrust him into Triton, and shove them both away from the leviathans. "GO!" I scream, willing them to flee. Momentum sends me tumbling backward and into the valley.

Something grabs me, and I spin mid-descent and gaze into a thousand unblinking eyes.

Invisible hooks pierce my skin—thousands upon thousands of them wriggling deep. Tiny and insidious, they burrow into flesh and bone and drag me down to the leviathans. Their eyes are so perfect. Round and symmetrically positioned. They bore into me, digging as deep as the hooks.

My mind snaps, my thoughts gushing out like rapids. Wild and unrestrained, they flow from me, and it's worse than pain. Worse than poisoned claws raking down my lip or my father slashing a cane against my back because I asked for food. The hooks spin me around so I face the mountain, and I see Triton and Ursan. They hover side by side on the edge of the valley, their faces so beloved to me.

"SO BELOVED TO ME," I say, and my mouth moves but the voice isn't mine. It ripples and overlaps, thousands of voices echoing thoughts ripped from my soul. I'm turned inside out, my secrets spilled across the seabed like coins tipped from a chest in Triton's vault. *"AFRAID TO GO THERE. SOMEONE WILL SAY I STOLE FROM THE KING."*

Tears stream from my eyes and leak into the sea. Somewhere, in the part of my mind that still belongs to me, shame rises.

"AFRAID OF DYING. SO AFRAID TO DIE IN THE PIT."

My tears flow faster, joining the torrent of my deepest, most private fears. The ones that grip just as deeply as the leviathans' hooks.

"ASHAMED. AN UNWORTHY PRETENDER. EVERYONE KNOWS."

Vomit rises, joining the shame. Gods, if only I could die.

"BUT SO AFRAID. THE LIGHT FOUND ME, AND I FOLLOWED IT. I CAPTURED A PRINCE AND PLEASED HIM IN BED."

It wasn't like that. Maybe at the very beginning but not after the first couple of nights. It wasn't like that!

“WOULD DO ANYTHING TO PLEASE HIM.”

That’s true. But not because I want money or fine things.

“THE OTHERS RESPECT ME. DEFER TO ME. ADMIRE ME. I HAVE POWER.”

But I don’t care! I’m not with Triton for the things he can give me. I love him.

“BUT I AM AFRAID. HE COULD LOVE THE OTHER MORE. THE WITCH HAS POWER AND IMPORTANT BLOOD. A CONSORT FIT FOR A KING.”

No! I stare up at Triton and Ursan, denials thrashing in my chest. That’s not right! I’m not worried about Triton loving Ursan more.

Except the thought is there. The tiniest wrinkle of doubt tucked deep in my mind. In the hazy spaces between consciousness and sleep dwells the fear that one day Triton might realize he’s better off with Ursan.

Without me.

They are beautiful together. They could be great together, but only if they go.

GO. I try to scream it, but the leviathans’ hooks won’t allow it. They’ve sunk too deep. The gush of thought reverses, flooding me with the leviathans’ certainty.

I’m a fool. I’ve always been one. But at last, I’m back where I belong. I was born in the Deep and now I’ll die here.

And I’ve dragged Triton and Ursan down with me.

Chapter 20

Ursan

Ari floats above the leviathans, his arms flung wide like he's stretched and pinned down even though nothing holds him.

But that's wrong. The leviathans grip him. I can feel it, just as I can feel his emotions flowing around me like the currents that crisscross the sea. His feelings surround me, sorrow and regret and humiliation swirling thick and fast.

But most of all, Ari feels shame. It's so deep it's bottomless—a never ending well pressed into the middle of his soul. He's ashamed of where he comes from, and he's ashamed he wanted better. He's ashamed he killed his brother but also ashamed he hesitated to strike in the first place. He's ashamed he killed my father, who never looked down on him for his origins.

They were happy in the beginning. Their joy flows around me too. Friendship and affection. My father persuaded Ari to shift, and he persuaded Ari to be wherever Triton was.

And there is something else—something Ari didn't tell me. My father persuaded Ari to live an immortal life. Folk from the Deep are mortal, their lives flashes in a puddle. My father, the most powerful sea witch of his generation, took Ari's spark of life and coaxed it into an inferno. He saw curiosity burning in Ari, and he gave him the lifespan and legs Ari needed to satisfy it. Years later, Ari drove a knife through my father's heart. Ari took my father's gifts. And then he took my father's life.

Of all the shame that weighs him down, this is the heaviest.

Tears flow from Ari's eyes, which brim with so much shame I can hardly look at him. Beside me, Triton's shoulders shake as he gazes at the male he loves.

He loves Ari. I feel that, too. Triton's love is as deep as the well of shame Ari carries. His love joins the currents, swirling around Ari's sorrow and regret. As it does in life, Triton's love fills in the gaps between the

currents, shoring Ari up when he might otherwise sink. As the leviathans' eyes stare without blinking, I see the bad and good together.

It's the leviathans' great weakness. They can't expose a being's secrets without exposing everything. But secrets and deep, hidden desires aren't simple. They're complex and messy. Muddy and layered like the sediment Triton loves to command.

He *loves* the sea. He treasures his people. He would die for them.

The leviathans show me these things, thick rivers of emotion flowing faster.

And as they reverse the flow and pump despair and resignation into Ari, I see something else.

I see *their* thoughts—or at least the reflection of thoughts they've accumulated. All of their knowledge. All the flotsam and emotion they've collected from the sea.

I see Bastian's dark brows drawn with worry. *"There's never been a sea witch in recorded history who didn't turn bad."*

I see Ari changing his mind about me and challenging his king. *"Is a lightning bolt evil?"*

I see him finding his heart as he watches me tip my head back and laugh in the center of hundreds of whirling stingrays, the curious mind he tries to hide expanding with wonder.

I see Triton sinking to his knees in the kelp forest, his grip on consciousness slipping as he tries to protect his people.

I see him gazing at me from the window in his sandcastle, his eyes tender and unguarded.

Yes, he locked me away. And it *kills* him.

Yes, Ari killed my father. But he *hated* it.

The leviathans show me these things. *Everything sinks to the bottom of the sea.* My father's screams echo through Triton's Great Hall. His black blood billows forth, spreading across the throne's steps as Triton blinks back tears and says the incantation to pull my father's power from his throat.

Triton needed it. But he can't carry it any longer. It's too heavy.

I look at the seashell pendant in my palm. As the currents flow around me, I act on instinct, crushing the shell in my fist.

POWER.

It flows between my fingers in thick, green ribbons. They twirl up and up, spinning and twisting and then folding together. The power is both familiar and foreign—and, strangely, a faint echo of the intense, unblinking power emanating from the leviathans.

The ribbons form one thick, glowing ribbon that bends toward me and wraps around my throat. Heat circles my neck, and my father's power sinks into my skin.

No, not his power.

His voice.

It echoes now, bidding the leviathans to RISE. Currents of memory join the secrets and emotions. *"RISE,"* he told them, beckoning them from their slumber.

Beside me, Triton gasps.

He didn't know. Crallek released the leviathans and then helped to subdue them. He tricked his friends.

He would have done worse.

His voice echoes through my head, and now it's joined by others. Hundreds of deep, powerful voices speak, filling my mind with memory and knowledge. Like the leviathans, my line—my race—passes this knowledge from one sea witch to another in an unbroken chain that stopped with my father.

And now that it's restored, the maelstrom of power in my mind reveals its source.

The leviathans.

We are kindred. And we are not of this world. The knowledge slams into me, sending me reeling backward until Triton grasps my shoulder. His eyes are stark, his mouth slack with pain. It flows all around him, overpowering the currents of love.

But no…the pain isn't entirely his.

Slowly, I drift forward. I look past Ari and stare into the leviathans' thousands of eyes.

Is a lightning bolt evil?

No, but it's not good, either. It's neither. The leviathans are the same—and they are *not supposed to be here*. The knowledge spins from the maelstrom in my head and lodges in the front of my mind. And in my head, a window opens, giving me a glimpse into a past so distant and ancient it

has long since passed from any memory on this plane. Even the oldest creatures of the Myth are unaware of it.

Because it's a secret every sea witch hoards and then passes to the next generation. Our power is amplified by the leviathans, whom our ancestors dragged into this plane through a portal that should have never been opened.

The leviathans stare, eyes peeled and full of agony. They will never stop trying to rise. Like a wounded animal, they seek to destroy the thing that hurts them. They have endured so long, they would destroy the world.

"YOU WILL NOT," I say, and they shudder and roll over one another, their agony swelling. It flows up to Ari, who cries out as his arms stretch wider, the tendons taut and threatening to burst.

"YOU WILL NOT HARM HIM." My voice ripples with my father's power and mine—and thousands of echoes from millennia of sea witches.

At once, the leviathans release Ari, shoving him toward Triton and me. Triton catches him and wraps his big arms around Ari's shoulders, enveloping Ari's smaller body and twining their tails together. Somewhere in my head, I long to join them. But I can't just yet.

I have something important to do first.

Turning to the leviathans, I spread my arms. *"RISE."*

Triton and Ari gasp. At the edge of my vision, I see them break apart and whip toward me.

"RISE AND FOLLOW," I tell the leviathans. *"I AM TAKING YOU HOME."*

WE SWIM FOR THREE DAYS.

The memories guide me. The males I would call my mates flank me.

The leviathans follow, commanded by my voice that keeps us swimming without rest. Like the leviathans, we move without ceasing, our bodies persuaded to keep going. To never hunger. To swim swiftly. We cross the ocean, leaving the creatures of the syndicate trembling in our wake.

Sirens venture close and then dart away, songs of warning spilling from their lips.

A clan of sharkmen approaches only to spin away with terror in their cold eyes.

For a time, stingrays accompany us. They streak along beside me, gentle wings coasting over my tentacles. Eventually, they move off, smiles on their broad faces.

Whispers reach me—rumors of something momentous happening in the ocean. Waves build and carry us forward. Whispers become shouts. Shouts build to roars. The syndicate waits, every creature on edge as we speed toward our destination.

At last, we reach it. Or at least the start of it. The trench I seek is deeper than any other, its depth unfathomable even to Ari.

But he follows me. He and Triton remain at my side as I command the leviathans to follow. We descend, diving into the trench the humans have marveled at for centuries. Anglerfish with serrated teeth and bobbing lanterns dart away from us, taking their light with them. But we don't need it. My power casts a glow over everything, splashing green light into the trench. The sea presses down on us—a weight so heavy it crushes our chests and makes every movement a burden.

Still, we descend. I tell Triton and Ari to turn back. Both ignore me and stubbornly continue descending. We move more slowly, the three of us struggling to reach the bottom.

Finally, it looms. The memories swirl faster. The leviathans spread over the seabed, eyes pleading as they slither and toil over one another, their bodies never at rest. At the very bottom of the trench is a door. It's nothing like the doors on the surface, or even the coral doorways in the castles Triton builds under the sea.

This door is a boundary, the memories tell me. Like the Veil that separated the Myth from the human plane, it divides this world from another. But unlike the Veil, this boundary isn't supposed to exist. The ancient sea witch who opened it broke laws in doing so. The boundary is a crime—a wrong I must put right.

Triton and Ari lean against each other, their faces bleached of color. The pressure is too much. We can't linger.

I open my mouth and let the memories speak. My power throbs as I focus on the seabed.

"OPEN," I command, and my voice shakes the ground. Fissures open and trace jagged spiderwebs across the ocean floor.

“OPEN.” The cracks widen. More form as the walls of the trench shake and heave.

I focus all my energy on the boundary. *“OPEN!”*

The outline of a giant door blazes to life on the floor of the sea. Summoning the last of my strength, I swim forward, grasp the edge in both hands, and fling it wide.

And I stand on the precipice of an abyss. A black, alien sea stretches before me, the expanse as broad as the sky that hangs above the surface. *This is bigger*, the memories murmur. The abyss is so much larger than my mind can comprehend. It teems with life I can almost see if I squint and look in the corners of my vision. But I don’t want to. The maelstrom of my ancestors’ knowledge flows through me, cautioning me not to look too closely. To look is to never leave this place.

And I don’t want to stay.

But the abyss wants me. It slithers around me and tugs, drawing me forward as the leviathans slide past me and flop heavily into the inky black.

FREE.

The leviathans keep coming, rolling to the door and flinging themselves through the boundary. They disappear into the blackness, which embraces them like a lover.

FREE.

I could be free in this place—my power unfettered. No rules or boundaries. No one telling me I’m wrong for striking. I could be the lightning. And I was meant to. Long ago, before humans walked upright, my ancestors lived in the abyss. If I returned, I wouldn’t have to rein in my power. I could gain more and never stop.

“NO,” I tell the abyss. Because it has consciousness too. *“MAYBE I BELONGED TO YOU ONCE.”* I look at Triton and Ari, who have slumped on the seabed but lift their heads as they feel my eyes on them. *“BUT I BELONG HERE NOW. I AM HOME.”*

The last of the leviathans pass me, their gelatinous forms swallowed up by the abyss. The black expanse tugs harder, beckoning me forward.

With supreme effort, I haul myself backward. Gritting my teeth, I bend and grasp the edges of the door. My power—and the power of every sea witch who came before me—burns in my throat. I open my mouth and release the maelstrom, screaming, *“THIS DOOR IS SHUT. IT WILL NEVER OPEN AGAIN.”* Muscles burning, I slam the door.

BOOM. The boundary collapses, sending a shockwave rippling across the seabed. The walls of the trench slide toward each other, threatening to close. Triton and Ari lie unconscious on the ground. Panic rising, I streak to them, grab their arms, and launch myself toward the surface. They hang limply in my grasp, their heavy bodies slowing my progress.

But I can't stop. As the trench shakes and rumbles, I whip my tentacles faster, ascending with my head tipped back and one goal pounding through my mind: *the future*. It shimmers above me—a golden expanse more vast than the abyss. It's a future with Triton and Ari, and I want it more than anything.

I swim faster. At some point, Triton and Ari rouse and swim with me. The three of us streak upward, eyes lifted toward the surface. Every so often, one of their tailfins brushes my tentacles, filling me with new purpose and spurring me toward the future.

The pressure eases. The trench widens, its walls stable at last. When I glance to my right, Ari catches my gaze. Green eyes smile, and a powerful emotion rises in my chest. *I'm so glad you found me.* Triton is a steady, solid presence on my other side, his white-and-gray hair waving behind him. He feels my stare and looks at me as we ascend, his gaze as steady as his big, powerful body. He'll always be steady—a foundation as strong as the coral he loves so much.

Sunlight slants through the water. We follow it, straining for the surface. Finally, we burst into the light. No words are spoken as we huddle, arms wrapped around each other and foreheads pressed together. Eyes closed, we breathe each other in. Time passes. Or maybe it pauses, the whole sea waiting as we rest. The sun dries our hair and warms our shoulders. The warmth spreads through me, and then Triton's deep voice rumbles in my ear.

"Ursan."

I lift my head and find two pairs of eyes—one bright green, the other the sapphire blue of the sea—focused on me.

On my throat.

I look down, and my eyes go wide. The sea around us glows softly, the color as rich and golden as the sun. But it's not the sun.

It's me.

"It's your power," Ari says, wonder in his tone. Slowly, he reaches out and touches my throat. Emerald eyes sheened with tears lift to mine. "You

saved yourself, Ursan. And you saved the sea."

A lump forms in my throat. I swallow it as I pull the males in my arms closer. Somehow, the three of us find a way to kiss, lips sliding effortlessly. *I didn't do it alone*, I tell them with strokes of my tongue against theirs. I couldn't have saved our world without Ari's willingness to sacrifice himself to the leviathans. And I wouldn't have gained the knowledge I needed without Triton baring his soul. In a way, none of it would have been possible without his decision to imprison me in the cave. Because if he hadn't, I would have been free to grow as corrupt as the rest of my people. I can change that now. I can find the others and show them a better way. I have a whole future ahead of me in which to do it.

And I have two males at my side to help me.

"We saved it," I tell them, my voice husky from using my power. I slide my tentacles over their fins and tighten my arms around them. "The three of us."

Epilogue

TRITON

One month later

I stand next to the bed and stroke my cock with even, measured pulls. Anticipation tingles through me as I watch Ari throw his head back and cry out. Ursan pins Ari's wrists to the bed with two powerful tentacles. The sea witch's hips roll as he thrusts his cock deep into Ari's channel.

"Fuck!" Ari yells, arching hard. "Harder. *Please*, harder."

Ursan's lips curve as he tightens his tentacles around Ari's wrists and quickens his pace. The muscles in his back flex and ripple as he pounds into Ari, giving him the fucking he begged for. Ari's swollen dick bounces between them, the tip red and leaking. A lock of dark hair falls over Ursan's forehead as he stares down at Ari with unmistakable possession in his eyes.

Watching them is my guilty pleasure. They're both uninhibited. Unafraid to ask for what they want. It doesn't hurt that they're gorgeous together. Observing from the sidelines is no hardship.

As if he senses my thoughts, Ursan wraps a tentacle around my waist and jerks me onto the bed. I grunt as the thick length squeezes my hips, positioning my bobbing cock next to Ari's head.

Ari meets my gaze at once, his green eyes glittering with hunger. "My king," he rasps, his body jerking with every snap of Ursan's hips. The tentacle around my waist presses me forward so my cockhead brushes Ari's lips. He groans and laps at the bead of moisture welling from my slit.

A ragged moan tears from my throat. Ari and Ursan have been teasing each other and fucking for almost two hours. We're supposed to be at the party right now, but—

Ari draws me straight to the back of his throat.

"Oh, *gods*," I grunt, spearing my fingers through his hair. My hips thrust of their own accord as his wicked tongue swirls over my shaft. I tighten my grip and fuck his face, my cockhead nailing the back of his throat.

Ursan picks up the pace, plowing Ari and stroking another tentacle over my tail. A third glides around my chest and sucks at one of my nipples. Bliss crackles through me, shooting from my chest to my throbbing dick.

Fuck. He knows what I like.

Ari hollows his cheeks as he sucks me harder. Masculine whimpers burst from his throat as Ursan plows him. It's perfect. They're both so perfect, it's not long before ecstasy overtakes me. With a bellow, I spurt deep into Ari's warm mouth, pumping so much seed down his throat he struggles to swallow it all.

Ursan grunts, then fumbles for Ari's dick and strokes him hard. "Come for me," he growls. "Right now."

I pull my softened dick from Ari's lips, and he looks up at Ursan with cum dribbling from his lips as Ursan fucks him and jerks him. Still catching my breath, I pinch one of Ari's flat, pink nipples.

"Ahhh!" Ari squeezes his eyes shut and screams his release, cum shooting from his cock in thick jets. Ursan cries out and shudders, his hips jerking wildly as he spurts into Ari's pouch.

A few breathless moments later, Ari is sandwiched between Ursan and me, his tailfin moving lazily from my tail to Ursan's tentacles. Ursan lies on his side, his head resting on one thick bicep as he strokes his fingers over Ari's leaking, swollen slit. Ari shivers and rolls toward him.

"Someone will be knocking on the door soon," I say. "The party started hours ago."

"Mmm," Ursan says, not stopping his play.

"Ari and I have a present for you."

Chocolate-brown eyes meet mine. "A present?"

Ari chuckles and rises from bed with a flick of his tail. Another flick, and he spins and extends a hand to Ursan. "Come on. Triton and I want to show you something."

Curiosity shimmers in Ursan's eyes. "No one's ever given me a present before."

My heart squeezes. "I think you'll like this one."

Moments later, the three of us approach the far wall of the castle's glittering reef. Ursan slows as he catches sight of Crallek's statue. Then he moves forward, his tentacles pulling him across the seabed to the base of the monument. When Ari and I reach him, his head is bent as he reads the inscription at the statue's base.

Ari and I exchange a helpless look. Regret sours my gut. I didn't even think about the statue. I simply wanted some privacy. With the castle overflowing with the Folk and other creatures, the reef seemed like the logical choice.

I clear my throat as I put a hand on Ursan's shoulder. "I'm sorry. We shouldn't have come here."

"No," he says, "it's all right. I've seen it before." He lifts his head and meets my gaze. "I just never got close enough to read it."

Ari slips his hand into Ursan's. "Crallek did a lot of good."

"And a lot of bad," Ursan says quietly.

"It's okay to remember the good things." Ari smiles as he brushes reverent fingers over Ursan's throat. "Like you. Without Crallek, Triton and I wouldn't have you."

Tension eases from Ursan's shoulders. As he turns his gaze to the statue, he nods. "Let's pull it down."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

He nods again, more firmly this time. "Yeah. I can remember the good without reminders of the bad."

Ari swallows, then reaches up and unclasps two of his necklaces. He pulls the strands from the tangle lying on his chest, revealing two round, green mating pearls.

Ursan's eyes go wide.

Ari's scar pulls as his smile grows. Slowly, he fastens one of the necklaces around Ursan's throat. Then he turns to me.

My heart pounds. I knew this was coming. We planned it together days ago. But I've waited for this moment for so long… Now that it's finally here, I can't stop the well of emotion that rushes into my throat and makes my eyes water.

Ari's strong, elegant fingers brush my hair as he fastens the mating pearl around my neck. When he draws back, his green eyes glitter with unshed tears. "You are my greatest gifts," he rasps. His eyes flick to Ursan. "Both of you. You're everything I dreamed of when I was stuck in the Deep. I thought I was swimming toward freedom. But I was swimming toward you."

Ursan and I lean in to kiss him at the same time. We're a soft tangle of tongues for a minute, and we end up laughing as our tears find their way into each other's mouths.

At last, I remove my own mating pearls. I place the first around Ari's neck. "My first true love," I murmur, stroking a fingertip over the pearl that rests between his pecs. "The most priceless treasure."

I turn to Ursan and find him watching us with love shining in his dark eyes. His breath hitches when I clasp the pearl around his neck. The green orb nestles beautifully next to its twin. "I love you," I tell him, meeting his gaze. "You are everything good, Ursan. I don't deserve you. I'll never stop being grateful I found you."

A single tear trails down his cheek before it's carried away on a current.

He goes last, his hands shaking as he unclasps his pearls. In the month he's lived in the castle, he's met every member of the court and accumulated a wide variety of necklaces as gifts. Many are well wishes from our clansmen, who accepted him more easily than I could have ever hoped. Another is from Renna. At first, I worried it might be cursed, but now I think the glittering, dark-purple chain might be Ursan's favorite.

He places the pearls around our throats and then drifts back with a heated look in his eyes. "Now everyone will know you're both mine."

Lust streaks straight to my cock. Beside me, Ari whines softly in his throat.

Ursan bites his bottom lip, a wicked little smile playing around his mouth. "We could…"

"We definitely could," Ari rasps.

Sounds of celebration echo across the courtyard. I give my new mates a stern look as I jerk my head toward the castle. "Come on you two. We're missing the party."

It takes a few more scowls and muttered threats, but we eventually make it back to the castle. The Great Hall is decked out with seafoam streamers and dangling anemone lights that cast a soft glow over the crowd. Couples dance, tails twined around each other. Renna and her clan of sirens are present, as are Dash and the sea nymphs. Dozens of other species mingle with the Folk. Laughter rises from every corner.

The sound dies down as I loom in the doorway. Dancers stop and every head turns in my direction. I glide to the center of the Hall and spread my arms.

"Welcome, friends. Tonight is for celebrating, so I won't bore you with a long speech."

“Don’t bore us with a short one, either!” someone shouts from a far corner of the Hall. Laughter erupts. In the corner, the drunken merman’s friends pretend to smother him.

I try to look stern but fail miserably when a smile tugs at my lips. Then I look at Ari and Ursan, and I lose the battle entirely as joy spreads through me. I beckon them from the doorway and raise my voice.

“It is my great honor to introduce you to my mates.” Ari’s cheeks are flushed as he swims to my side. Ursan flashes one of his shy smiles as he comes to the other.

The hall erupts in a cacophony of noise and cheering. The musicians start back up, filling the air with a throbbing beat. Clan members surround us, offering hugs and congratulations.

A clacking sound drifts from the doorway, and I look up and see Bastian. Ari brushes his tailfin against mine—a reminder that we agreed not to kill him. Ursan requested leniency for my former advisor. *“I don’t want to start our future with blood on our hands.”*

Bastian hovers in the doorway, dark eyes flitting nervously between Ari, Ursan, and me.

Ursan moves first, going to Bastian and offering his hand. “Thank you for coming.”

Bastian looks startled as he shakes Ursan’s hand. “Thank you for inviting me,” he rasps. He lifts dark eyes to mine and gives a tentative nod of acknowledgement—and perhaps apology.

I stare, anger pumping hard in my veins. I’m not sure I can forget what he did, but I’ll try to forgive him. He believed he was acting in the best interests of the syndicate. His beliefs were misguided and warped by the atrocities Crallek committed. Ursan forgives him. The best I can do is follow my sea witch’s lead. I’m not ready to shake Bastian’s hand, but I return his nod.

The night passes in a whirl. We drink, dance, and feast. Ari sits in my lap on the throne as we watch Ursan work the room with the sea nymphs in tow. They move with him, bobbing at his side with wagging tails.

“They’re like very tiny guards,” Ari murmurs.

“Mmm,” I agree, a smile pulling at my lips. “Devoted ones.”

Ursan approaches Renna with his arms spread wide. The siren queen shoots me a panicked look as he embraces her, one big palm splayed over

her back. As Ari puts his hand over his mouth to hold in his laughter, Renna gives Ursan's tattooed shoulder an awkward pat.

"Have you ever seen a cat on the surface?" Ari murmurs from behind his hand.

"A time or two," I say, grinning at Renna.

"That's what it looks like when you try to hug a cat that doesn't want to be hugged."

As Ursan pulls back and beams at Renna, Ari strokes his tail along mine. "It's time."

Yes. Long past time.

Ari and I rise together. He moves to one side of the throne and folds his arms. For the second time tonight, I let my voice boom across the Hall. "Ursan!"

My mate whirls, tentacles trailing across the floor. When I gesture for him to approach, he smiles and comes swiftly. His smile grows as he ascends the steps.

"You summoned me, my king?" he asks, eyes twinkling.

I nod solemnly. Ari plucks my trident from behind the throne and hands it to me. I balance it on my palms, showing Ursan the glyphs that cover the lavastone handle. "I carved these the day I became Lord of the Sea Syndicate. They come from an old saying. It's a sea witch saying, actually." I take Ursan's hand and trail it down the glyphs. Instantly, they glow soft and golden.

As his eyes go wide, I smile and translate the glyphs. "*The sea is where we lose and find*." I rest my hand over Ursan's. When his brown eyes meet mine, I give his fingers a gentle squeeze. "Such simple words with so many meanings. I believe I lost my way for a while. But then I found you, and I found a piece of myself I didn't even know I was looking for." I curl his fingers around the trident and drift back, leaving it in his hands. "The sea was lost, too. But she found her way again. She found you."

Ursan's lips part. Confusion and the glimmerings of understanding swirl in his eyes as he looks to Ari and then back to me.

"The trident was always meant for you," I say. "I was simply holding it until I found you. I know that now…my lord." I sink down the steps with Ari at my side. Together, we bow before Ursan.

Gasps spread through the Great Hall. A rustling just behind me makes me look over my shoulder. Renna and the sirens sink low, their heads

bowed. Around the Hall, others do the same, the Folk and the rest of the crowd acknowledging Ursan as the new Lord of the Sea Syndicate. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bastian lower his head.

Ursan appears frozen for a moment as he stares over the crowd. Then he gulps. “Rise. Please, all of you rise.”

Ari and I ascend the steps as the crowd obeys. Smiling at Ursan, I grip his hand and hoist it into the air. “I present Ursan, the new Lord of the Sea Syndicate!”

The Hall erupts with shouts and cheers.

Ursan turns to me with worry in his eyes. “You’re giving all this up?”

“I’m giving it to the right person,” I correct, then lean in and kiss the worry from his lips. When we break apart, wonder fills his eyes.

Ari glides around us and gives Ursan a sultry look. “You better believe I’ll be calling you *my lord* in bed.”

Ursan’s nostrils flare. “Gods,” he breathes.

It’s not long before someone pulls Ursan into the crowd. The musicians strike back up, and laughter rings out again. Everyone wants to talk to him. Even the coral in the walls seems to strain toward him. Smiling, I wonder how long it’ll take him to notice the anemone light up when he moves down the hallways.

Suddenly, the sea nymphs appear in front of Ari and me. Dash swims to the front, his tail waving in the water.

I reach out and capture a tiny fin. “Thank you for watching and guiding him. Thank you…for everything.”

“We’re happy you found him, Lord Triton.” Big, round eyes soften. “And that you finally found your peace.”

The nymphs swim away, tails fluttering as they dart toward Ursan.

Ari sighs and strokes his tailfin over mine as we watch Ursan tug Renna onto the dance floor. “You’re not really a *lord* anymore, huh?”

“I suppose not.” The realization sends a heady rush of possibilities spinning through my head. Without the burden of the syndicate, I’ll be free to lead my clan. I’ll be free to *build*. I can make that city in the valley. I can make anything.

My mate turns to me. Green eyes shine with lust and love as he slides a hand up my chest to cup my jaw. “That’s just fine with me, my king.”

Did the dragon Ari and Ursan saw in Gothel's club pique your interest? Then you'll definitely want to read the scorching-hot story in Temper the Flame, an MM Beauty and the Beast retelling. Beau is a bookish baker, and Fuoco is a sensual, bejeweled beast who rules the skies. But he'd much rather rule his mate…

An Excerpt from Temper the Flame

AN MM BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING

FUOCO

I sit in the vaulted Great Hall thrumming bejeweled fingers against the glossy black armrest of my chair. Servants scurry about, ferrying trays of food and mead. Two of my enforcers, Varden and Nazzar, sit to my right. The third, Lirem, is absent, which has me on edge. He's usually back from his rounds well before dinner.

The witch Riselle sits farther down the table. Tall and elegant, she wears her graystreaked black hair in a bun at her nape. She brims with power, although she's been quiet since she arrived seeking asylum from her coven. She's hardly the first. Over time, my syndicate has earned a reputation as something of a refuge. Our distance from the other syndicates offers an escape for those in difficult or intolerable situations.

I like to think I have something to do with that reputation, too. In the two centuries that I've ruled the Fire Syndicate, I've worked hard to build a community where everyone feels safe.

An elderly servant appears at my side and places a tray of raw venison steaks before me. When I turn to thank her, she ducks her head, obscuring her face and leaving me staring at her white cap. I swallow the sigh that rises in my chest. My human servants never willingly meet my gaze. Most of the time, they avoid looking at me altogether. It's been this way since I accepted the role as leader of the Fire Syndicate. Even in human form, I terrify the humans who dwell in my territory.

It could be my sheer size. I tower over every one of them. It could also be the demi-form I take when my temper rises. When emerald-green scales slide down my arms and my hair turns the same shade, my servants scatter.

I try to keep my temper at bay. But dragons are passionate creatures. Our fire always simmers just beneath our skin.

"Your meal, sir," the woman says, backing up a step. She keeps her gaze down and folds trembling hands in front of her. "Freshly hunted and uncooked just the way you like it, sir."

I shove down the irritation that bubbles whenever the servants act petrified in my presence. I've done everything I can to make them comfortable. They're handsomely paid. They enjoy plush living quarters. I even provide magical healthcare right here in the castle.

Still, they're afraid. Always afraid.

Even in my current humanoid form, the sour stench of the woman's fear burns my nostrils. Her heart gallops in her feeble chest. It's on the tip of my tongue to remind her how much I've done to maintain peace on this plane—how much effort I invest in making sure humans can live in harmony with various creatures of the Myth.

But I swallow my explanations along with my sigh. Reminding your subjects why you lead them doesn't inspire loyalty—or love. Actions speak louder than words. It's a distinctly human saying. In the Myth, words work just fine, especially if you can imbue your words with magic. But I've adopted the human saying. I've tried to fit in.

"Thank you, Ellen," I say, arranging my features in what I hope is a reassuring smile. Rheumy eyes dart to mine and drop quickly to the ground. Before I can say anything else, she turns and scurries away.

I release my sigh.

Varden snorts, drawing my gaze to him. He gives me an exasperated look as he lowers his wine. "When will you learn, Fuoco? The help will never see us for anything other than the monsters we are. They're not going to be your friends."

"I don't want them to be my friends," I say tightly. *I'd settle for them not wetting themselves when I glance in their direction.*

My enforcer shrugs. "Humans are narrow-minded, clannish creatures. It's hardly surprising they blew up their civilization."

I grab my glass of wine and swirl it, inhaling the musky tannins that were once popular in the California region of the United States. That whole area was reclaimed by the sea after the humans' nuclear wars "blew up their civilization" as Varden calls it. In truth, they destroyed the planet. The explosions were so powerful, they ripped the Veil between the human plane and the Myth realm. Magic poured into the human world, devouring technology and wreaking havoc. Even with all of our powers combined, the creatures of the Myth only possessed enough magic to mend one plane. We had a choice: repair our world and let the humans die out, or fix their plane and abandon the Veil to the mists of history. We chose to save the humans.

And now we're all one big, happy family.

Suppressing a snort of my own, I bury my nose deeper in my glass. The cabernet's rich, herbal bouquet releases the knot of tension between my shoulder blades. Wine is one of the pleasures of this plane. The humans got that much right, at least.

Maybe I could start a winery here in the North, in what was once known as "upstate New York." The Fire syndicate covers nearly a hundred thousand square miles. The weather is temperamental, especially in the winter, but I'm a dragon. Surely I could think of a way to keep grapes warm.

A greenhouse, perhaps…

"I've angered you, my lord," Varden says in a low tone.

I set my wineglass down and turn to him. Rings glitter on his fingers. A stack of priceless bracelets adorns his wrists. His linen shirt is bespoke, tailored by my court clothier. Like all dragons, he loves fine things. And like most of my people, he finds it difficult to relate to humans.

"I'm not angry," I say. "Merely frustrated. The Veil between the human world and ours fell nearly two hundred years ago. Dragons are hardly a rare sight, especially around here. I'd like to be able to walk among the humans. Maybe talk to them."

Varden frowns. "But…why? What could they possibly have to say that's important?"

Irritation sparks in my chest. "They're unlikely to speak to me if I approach them with that attitude. We are not the dragon houses of old, lording our rule over beings we deem lesser." I lean toward him as I warm up to a topic near and dear to my heart. "The humans may appear weak to you, but I have found them to be—"

"They will never be *us*, Fuoco." Varden's dark eyes glint in the candlelight. "They will never shift into great beasts and take to the skies. I would not call them lesser, but we are certainly not the same."

My sigh returns. Varden and I have had this discussion so often I sometimes feel like I'm cursed to forever repeat it. We're unlikely to see eye to eye. As rigid as his way of thinking is, he's actually more liberal in his views than the majority of dragons. Still, his insistence on *othering* humans hinders my goal of a truly integrated society.

"You don't shift, either," I remind him. I let a hint of my beast seep into my tone. "And if you don't find your *selsara*, you'll *never* shift. We are

not so different from the humans, Varden. As my enforcer, you work closely with all of my people, including the humans who live in this syndicate. It will benefit us all if you at least attempt to understand them."

And I *need* him to understand them. I need him to serve as an intermediary between me and my people. As a dragon from a lower house, he mingles with the humans more easily than I ever could. Like all my enforcers, Varden is a head shorter than I and less obviously *dragon*.

For a moment, Varden seems like he wants to argue. Then he sits back in his chair and runs a beringed hand through his short, brown hair. He falls silent for a moment before saying, "You're right, of course. It's difficult to undo generations of ingrained thinking."

"If I didn't think you capable of change, I wouldn't have chosen you to serve as an enforcer." Varden has been by my side from the beginning of my rule. I couldn't run the syndicate without his steady presence. I put a hand on his shoulder. "You bring honor to my house and yours, Varden of House Forza."

He opens his mouth, but whatever he might have said is interrupted by the Great Hall's double doors flying open. The glossy panels crash into the stone, making every head in the Hall turn toward the entrance. I rise and prepare to shift.

An elderly human male falls through the opening and onto both knees. Lirem appears behind him, his face twisted into a sneer. My enforcer's pale blond hair tangles around his broad shoulders. His eyes glitter red as he stares down at the human. One of Lirem's sleeves is torn at the elbow, revealing the shimmering red scales of his dragon. He lifts his head and locks gazes with me. The look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know.

This human is a thief or a killer. Maybe both.

I round the high table with Varden and Nazzar on my heels. Except for the sound of our boots on the flagstones, the Hall is silent as we approach Lirem and his prisoner.

The human is filthy. He remains in a crouch at Lirem's feet, his white hair streaked with more than a month's worth of dirt. His clothing is full of holes, his shoes falling apart.

A highwayman, perhaps. The Fire Syndicate is isolated in the North. The road between my territory and the rest of the syndicates is long and often treacherous. My enforcers and I do our best to provide protection, but

we can't be everywhere at once. My syndicate is a haven for monsters and humans alike. All are welcome. But not everyone wants to live peacefully. Thieves prey on the humans who travel the road from the Fire Syndicate to the other three territories. This man is likely one of them—a degenerate who would rather steal than do an honest day's work.

Lirem kicks the man in the side, making him grunt. "Stand before Lord Fuoco."

The man gets to his feet. He lifts his chin and meets my gaze with a brazen stare. Eyes the color of the sea pierce me. My nape prickles as an odd awareness settles over me. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was unafraid. He's either too stupid to be intimidated, or he's lost his mind. I look at Lirem behind him.

"His crime?"

"I caught him stealing from the apple orchard." Lirem crosses thick arms over his broad chest. Like Varden, he hails from one of the lower dragon houses and can't shift. But his heritage is an advantage. Like my other enforcers, his dragon traits won't fully manifest until he meets his selsara. His mate. As such, the humans find him more approachable.

Although, the man in front of me probably wishes he'd never approached Lirem.

He continues to stare me down, his sea-colored eyes unflinching. His hands are balled in fists at his sides. His muscles tremble.

Definitely insane. I'm nearly three hundred pounds of muscle. I could flatten him with one blow.

If only it were that simple.

I let my beast rise. The human's pupils reflect the green flames that dance in my eyes. "You know the punishment for stealing," I tell him. "Do you wish to say anything?"

At last, the man begins to sweat. It trickles down his dirt-streaked forehead and pools in the purple hollows beneath his eyes. His chest rattles as he draws quick, shallow breaths. Death is a shadow just behind him. Regardless of tonight's outcome, he's not long for this world.

I give him a minute, then two, allowing silence to stretch. Behind me, the Great Hall stays quiet. My court watches. And waits.

Lirem gives me a meaningful look. "Let's take this outside, shall we, my lord?"

I nod and gesture toward the door.

He grips the human by the scruff of the neck and steers him out of the hall. As Varden and Nazzar follow, I face the court. A range of expressions greets me. Curiosity. Irritation. Boredom. The last is the most prominent. My court is mostly comprised of Myth creatures. The execution of a human thief is hardly compelling entertainment.

I raise my voice. “Everyone, please return to your dinners.”

Almost immediately, chatter resumes. Knives and forks clink against plates. Laughter rises from one of the tables. I turn to head outside, but a flash of white stops me.

Ellen stands in the shadows in the far corner of the Hall hugging an empty serving platter flat against her chest. Her face is a mask of horror, her eyes sheened with tears. Suddenly, her eyes flick to me. With a startled gasp, she turns and flees.

I don’t sigh this time. Instead, something else rises in my chest. Disappointment?

Or is it shame?

Laughter rings out again. Pushing the feeling aside, I stride out the doors and into the courtyard. I’ve ruled the Fire Syndicate for almost two hundred years. My subjects know what to expect. My rules are simple.

No theft. No murder. No assault.

And no exceptions.

That’s the way it is. The way it *has* to be. When monsters and humans mingle, the rules must be crystal clear. It’s the only way to maintain peace. I can’t allow the emotions of one human servant to cloud my judgment.

The courtyard is vast—large enough to accommodate my dragon form and the fire I spew when I mete out justice. Lirem drags the thief to a thick metal post and fastens chains around his waist. Then he yanks the man’s arms above his head and locks them in metal cuffs.

“Not iron, eh?” the man says, his raspy voice almost shocking after his previous silence.

His words are a taunt. Everyone knows creatures of the Myth despise iron. The metal hurts us and weakens our magic. An iron spear, crafted by an early human I encountered, is responsible for the tiny scar that runs down my stomach.

I step close to the human. “I do not tolerate thieves. If you have any last words or family I should care for, now is the time to say so.”

The old man sneers, sea-colored eyes darting over my shoulder to where Lirem stands behind me. “Don’t tolerate thieves, huh? What about those under your own roof?”

My enforcer snarls and moves past me. He raises a hand, but I grab his arm before he can land a blow.

“Hold, Lirem,” I say quietly, meeting his red gaze. “There’s no honor in venting your frustration on a dead man.”

There’s a tense moment of silence. Then my chief enforcer gives a curt nod. “Yes, my lord. My apologies.”

I release him and turn back to the human. “Dragons didn’t steal from you, *thief*. None among the Myth have taken from your kind. On the contrary, we’ve given you everything, including your world. We didn’t ask for the Veil to fall, and we certainly didn’t ask to be pulled into this plane. Believe me, ours was far nicer.”

As he did in the Hall, the man holds my stare. Vitriol burns in his eyes. Dirty lips press tightly together.

Which is why I don’t anticipate the glob of saliva he launches at me. It lands on my cheek with a disgusting splat.

“You dragons with your fancy clothes and shiny jewels can fuck off!” he shouts. “Treasure-hoarding thieves, the lot of you. Burn in hell!” His blue eyes are wild as he jerks against the cuffs securing him to the post.

“Only one thing will be burning tonight, old man,” Lirem snarls as I wipe the saliva from my face. My enforcer’s fangs appear between his lips as his red eyes glow more brightly.

“Enough,” I growl, hearing the anger in my voice. Lirem hears it, too, because he shuts up and turns to me with a chastened look.

I loosen my mirrored tie, remove it, and place it in his waiting palm. When I turn, Nazzar is behind me, his quick fingers unlacing my black corset. I shrug out of it, and he catches it before it can fall.

My shirt goes next, then my pants, and then I stand nude in the courtyard with moonlight streaming down on me.

But I’m not quite finished undressing. My enforcers wait as I remove my rings and the stud in my ear. I drop the jewelry into Nazzar’s open palm, then unscrew the ends of the tiny barbells through my nipples. My dick is last. I remove the jeweled Prince Albert from my cockhead, then the barbells that march down the underside of my shaft. Finally, I lift my cock and unscrew my guiche piercing.

Now I'm well and truly naked. Already, I miss my jewels. But shifting with barbells through my cock is an experience I don't care to repeat.

Lirem and Nazzar jog toward the safety of the castle.

The human thief casts a dismissive gaze down my body.

I know what he sees—and I know his dismissiveness is an act. Even in human form, I'm not easily dismissed. Seven feet tall and packed with muscle, green scales glitter like emeralds from my shoulders to the tops of my thighs.

The man says nothing, but he licks his cracked lips as he yanks on the cuffs.

He's nervous now. I'll make sure he's not nervous for long.

Stepping back, I let the fire overtake me. It spreads through my mind like a trail of embers igniting. The blaze explodes in my chest, and then I'm standing in dragon form in the courtyard staring down at the tiny, chained man.

He cries out, his bravado evaporating.

I take no pleasure in it, nor do I relish this task. But I can't allow the lawless to ruin the syndicate for everyone else. Opening my mouth, I call my fire, feeling it mix with gas from the sacks just inside my cheeks. It sizzles hot in my throat as I drag in a breath to give it oxygen.

"Wait!" the man calls out. "I've got a wife, a fam—"

A stream of fire silences him, his skin bubbling and cracking. He shrieks as his flesh melts from his bones. Within seconds, bone disintegrates into dust. Fire flows from my mouth as sorrow fills my soul. Taking a life is the worst thing I have to do for my syndicate. Each death is a stain on my soul, and some days I wonder just how black it can get before it's as dry and worthless as the remains before me.

Now-empty cuffs clink and jangle against the post as I call my fire back and let it die in my throat. The stones around the post glow red-hot orange. They'll cool quickly. I built my castle with my duty in mind, choosing granite strong enough to withstand hot temperatures.

Lirem jogs back to me as I shift. He offers clothing, but I wave it away. "You're getting slow, old friend," I say, pointing to his torn sleeve. "Did the human have a weapon?"

"A knife," Lirem says, his voice gruff. "He surprised me. Popped up from some bushes on the side of the road. He was obviously lying in wait

for one of us." Lirem scowls. "These fools never change. You'd think the humans would greet us with gratitude. Instead, we get knives."

"It will come with time. Most of us lost everything when the Veil fell. But we've built something good here. Perhaps one day, the humans will see it as we do."

Lirem looks unconvinced, but his scowl fades as he glances toward the castle. "Tell me there's fresh venison for dinner so I can forget this entire sordid night."

"I left a platter on the table. It's yours."

"You dined already?"

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry." I look at the stars just beginning to emerge in the night sky. "I think I'll go flying."

His scowl returns. "Don't tell me you're upset over having to kill the thief."

I look to where the dead man's dust now swirls in the early evening air. The breeze picks up, spreading it over the cooling stones. In an hour or so, no trace of him will remain.

"Fuoco—"

"I'll return by morning," I say, striding away from my enforcer before he can tell me I'm being sentimental. Or weak.

An hour later, I streak down the coastline of Old New York City—now known as the Hallows. Electricity is scarce in my territory, but there's enough of it here to illuminate the syndicates below. Before the Veil fell, the city blazed like fire. It's softer now. Gentler. I find I prefer it this way.

The Statue of Liberty slumbers on her side in the bay, the wounds she gained during the human's war hidden by the seabed. Her head rests in the Sea Syndicate, which is ruled by Triton. He and his mermen are unlikely to be near the surface, so I wheel and glide down in a lazy spiral. Flapping my wings once, I alight on one of the spikes of the statue's crown.

The ocean is choppy, its waves frigid and restless in winter. Water crashes against the statue's face and drips down her cheeks like tears. I watch the tide as I catch my breath from the long flight. The waves are murky and black, the crests tipped with foam.

After a moment, I twist around and face the statue's feet. One sandal rises above the waves, its toes pointed toward the shiny towers of the Air Syndicate. Ruled by the gargoyle Gothel, the Air Syndicate is the only part of the Hallows that resembles what used to be New York City. Like all gargoyles, Gothel loves buildings. Over the years, he's purchased properties and raised new skyscrapers, restoring Old Manhattan to its former glory.

But I'm not here to admire the buildings. I want to talk to their master.

Lifting my snout to the sky, I let out a roar. Then I settle more comfortably on the crown and wait.

Half an hour later, a winged figure appears at the edge of the tallest tower. He lingers for a moment, then disappears. Amusement curves my lips. I should have known he wouldn't come to me.

Shoving off the crown, I swoop across the bay and flap my wings. Currents buffet me as I approach Gothel's tower. Light flashes, guiding me to the spinning glass window at the top of his library. Dozens of panes retract, creating an opening large enough for me to sail through.

Snapping my wings close to my body, I streak toward it. Wind screams in my ears as the opening looms larger. I dive through it, pull up fast, and shift as I drop four stories to the ground.

It rears up and meets me far sooner than I'm ready for it. I land with a heavy grunt and wince at the sting that reverberates up my legs.

Gothel leans against his desk in human form, his powerful body wrapped in an expensive three-piece suit.

Another power play. He shifted and dressed. I know without asking he won't offer me clothes. Not that I'd deign to wear anything he offers. Gothel's wardrobe is pricey, but his taste is woefully uninspiring.

"Rough landing," he murmurs, smiling as he puffs at a cigar. Big, dark horns swoop up and away from his head. Whiskey-colored eyes glint in the electric light.

"Smoother than most of yours," I say easily.

"It's been a while since you visited, Fuoco. What do you want?"

Straightforward and to the point. This is why I prefer Gothel over the other syndicate lords. Triton is too dramatic and self-righteous. Wotan is a brooding asshole. Gothel is reasonable. Most of the time.

I stalk naked across his office and grab a cigar from the box on his desk. When I turn, he stands at the ready with a lighter. Sucking in a deep hit, I sigh when pleasure spreads warm and tingly through my gut.

“Your girl gets better with every batch,” I say, raising my cigar in salute.

Gothel smiles. “True. She outdoes herself.”

We smoke in companionable silence. When he doesn’t push me to state my business, I take a moment to study him. He looks different. Sated and happy. Peaceful. I’ve heard rumblings as to why that might be, but I’m curious to confirm it.

“You haven’t answered my letter,” I say as I exhale.

Golden eyes narrow. “I can’t take a student, Fuoco. I’m a mated male now. My teaching days are behind me.”

So the rumors are true. I suppress a growl at that less-than-fortunate news. “Tell me more, my friend.”

A smile touches his lips. “I took him as a student and he wormed his way into my heart. He hasn’t left.”

I raise my brows. “I wasn’t aware you had a heart.” But now that I listen for it, I hear the slow, steady beat. The sound is irrefutable evidence that Gothel speaks the truth. He’s heart-bound, as the gargoyles call it. Mated for life. “Congratulations,” I add. “I’m happy for you.”

“I can recommend other teachers,” he offers.

Sighing, I examine the tip of my cigar. “I’ll take you up on that. I’m being hounded daily by a dragon who believes his daughter would make the perfect mate for me.” I look at Gothel. “I was hoping to dump her into your capable hands and get her father off my back in the process.”

“Noble of you,” he says. “What’s wrong with her power?”

“We’re not sure. It manifests so sporadically, we can’t tell if she possesses foresight or compulsion. But the latter is so rare among my kind, I suspect it’s foresight and she simply doesn’t want to see the future.”

He grunts. “I’ll send a letter of introduction to two others who might be able to help.”

“Many thanks.” Remembering her father’s latest visit—and the *three-hour* dinner I sat through—I shudder. “The sooner the better.”

Gothel’s smile gleams in his eyes. “You heard Wotan is recently mated as well?”

“Yes.” News travels slowly to my syndicate, but that particular bit of gossip spread like wildfire. “I can’t imagine any male taming him. I think I’d like to meet this enigma.”

“Maybe you will,” Gothel says, puffing at his cigar.

Unlikely. At least not any time soon. Winter is always a tense time in the Fire Syndicate. More than any other season, it seems to produce crime and disruption. And after tonight, I'll have to keep a close eye on the road and the villages around it. Where there's one thief, there are inevitably more.

"Thanks for this," I say, waggling my cigar. "And for the help with the female."

Gothel inclines his dark head. "Any time."

After a few more pleasantries, I thank him again and head for home. As I fly north, my thoughts drift back to the courtyard and the ashes I left behind. The thief is gone, but his accusations ring in my head.

"Treasure-hoarding thieves, the lot of you."

I snort, sending smoke rolling from my nostrils. He dared to call me a thief after Lirem caught him red-handed in the orchard. To an outsider, death for stealing apples might seem overly harsh. But rules are rules, and mine exist for a reason. No theft. No murder. No assault. *No exceptions.* Opening that door invites disaster. The Fire Syndicate is the most peaceful and prosperous of all the syndicates. It's a refuge. I'm determined to keep it that way.

But as the spires of my castle appear in the moonlight, my head fills with visions of sea-colored eyes and a woman's white cap.

About Anna Fury

Anna Fury is a North Carolina native, fluent in snark and sarcasm, tiki decor, and an aficionado of phallic plants. Visit her on Instagram for a glimpse of the sexiest wiener wallpaper you've ever seen. She currently lives in North Carolina with her Mr. Right, a tiny tornado, and a lovely old dog.

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Amy Pennza is a USA Today Bestselling Author of steamy paranormal and contemporary romance. After stints as a lawyer and a soldier, she discovered her dream job is writing about stubborn alphas and smart heroines. She lives in the Great Lakes region with her husband and five children.

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